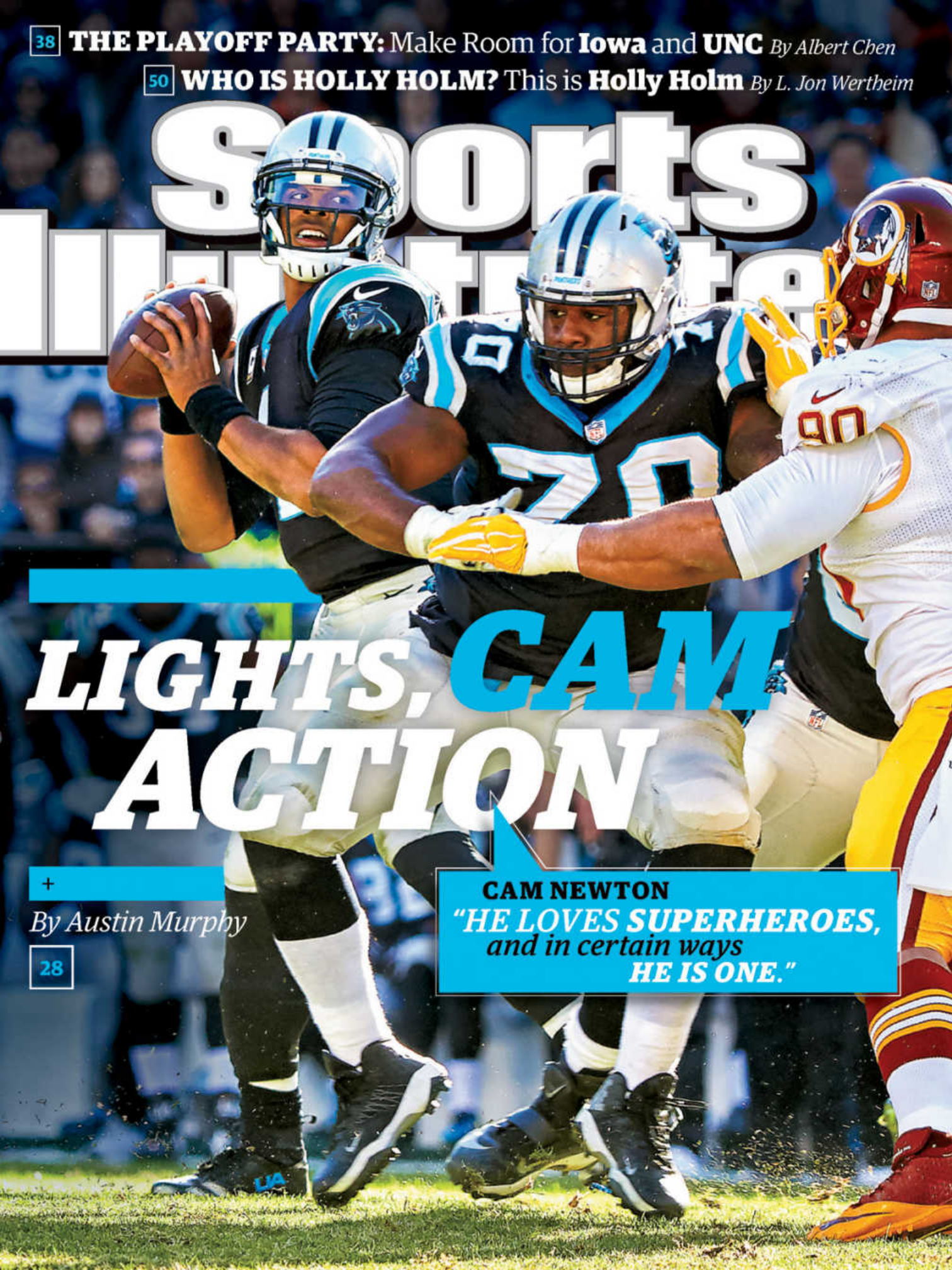
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Sports Illustrated



LIGHTS, CAM ACTION

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By Austin Murphy

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CAM NEWTON
"HE LOVES SUPERHEROES, and in certain ways HE IS ONE."

FROM THE EDITORS OF GOLF.COM

GOLD





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SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK: Simon Bruty for Sports Illustrated (Newton); Jeff Haynes for Sports Illustrated (Iowa)

Photograph by **Simon Bruty for Sports Illustrated**

Sports Illustrated

SI.COM

FOR NOV. 30, 2015

+ Fish Tales



After the 49ers defeated the Dolphins 38-16 in Super Bowl XIX, Miami owner ***Joe Robbie*** *left Stanford Stadium knowing he had the second-best team in football but not knowing the location of one of his sons, Dolphins general manager Michael Robbie*. . . . Every Wednesday, leading up to Super Bowl 50—which kicks off at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif., on Feb. 7—SI.com will publish an installment of our Untold Super Bowl Stories, focusing on the overlooked, forgotten or just plain strange history of football's biggest game. This week, go to **SI.com/SuperBowlStories** to read Michael Rosenberg's story on the Robbie family, which chronicles the younger Robbie's struggle with substance abuse and his erratic behavior while serving as GM, Joe's plans for a Super Bowl in Miami and the family's feud over Joe's multimillion-dollar estate.

SI.COM's

Top Stories



1 The Palmer Plan
For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com—including a feature on how Cardinals QB **Carson Palmer** learned 171 plays in five days—go to **SI.com/topstories**

2 The Center of Innovation
Former Crystal Palace USA player-coach Jim Cherneski has created one of soccer's most popular brands

3 The Car Club
Giving a car to the MVP after a championship game is a tradition older than the Super Bowl itself

4 Wall Street to the Power Five?
How former CEO Joe Moglia emerged as Coastal Carolina's inventive coach

5 Hometown History
Wichita State guard Fred VanVleet is driven (and haunted) by his hometown's past

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Digital Bonus

It Wasn't a Fluke, It Was a Flutie

From the SI Vault Dec. 3, 1984

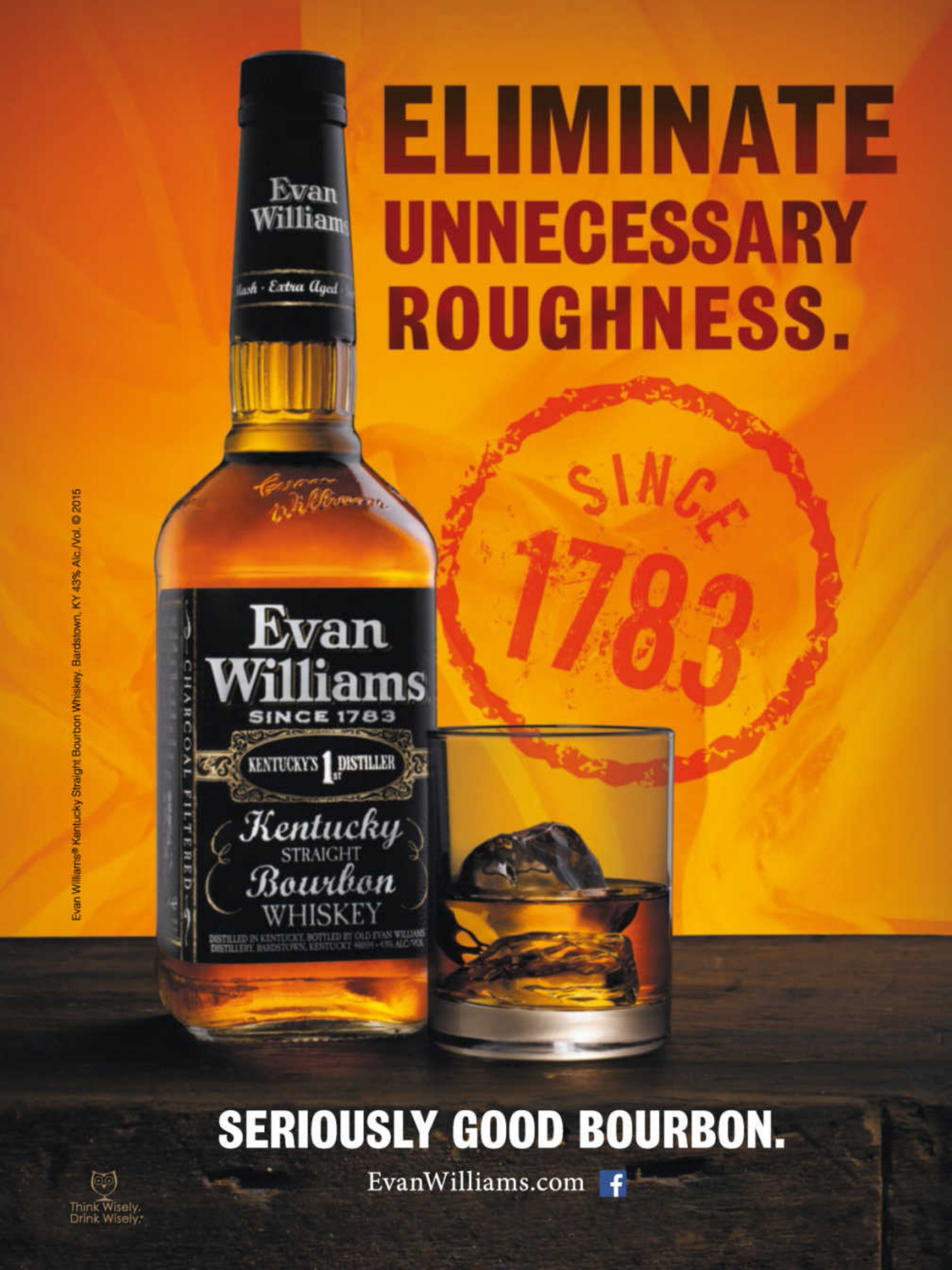


Doug Flutie arched a last-second pass into the heavens that gave BC—ho-hum—another miracle win

By John Underwood

To read this and other stories from the Sports Illustrated *archives, go to* **SI.com/vault**
Plus, relive Underwood's cover story on Flutie's famous Hail Mary at SI.com/podcasts

KATHY WILLENS/AP (ROBBIE); HEINZ KLUETMEIER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FLUTIE); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (PALMER)


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Leading Off

1 of 3

Sparty Hearty

Michigan State linebacker Darien Harris (45) and defensive back Demetrious Cox (7) stopped Ohio State quarterback J.T. Barrett in the third quarter of the Spartans' 17–14 win last Saturday in Columbus. The MSU defense was dominant, holding the Buckeyes to five first downs and 132 total yards. Ohio State's hopes of a second straight national championship were likely thwarted when junior Michael Geiger nailed a 41-yard field goal as time expired. Following the loss—the Buckeyes' first since Sept. 6, 2014—OSU star running back Ezekiel Elliott, a junior, announced that he would turn pro after the season.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JAMIE SABAU
GETTY IMAGES


45
7





Leading Off

Busch's League

Kyle Busch drove his number 18 Toyota to the top of the stock car world on Sunday, winning the Ford EcoBoost 400 at Homestead-Miami Speedway to earn his first NASCAR Sprint Cup Series title. The 30-year-old Busch had missed the first 11 points races after breaking his right leg and left foot in the season's opener, on Feb. 21 at Daytona. Kyle is the younger brother of 2004 champion Kurt Busch; with Kyle's victory they became the second set of brothers to win the season championship. Terry Labonte took titles in 1984 and '96, and his brother, Bobby, won in 2000.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JARED C. TILTON
NASCAR/GETTY IMAGES


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Leading Off

Smack In the Middle

From the opening bell, 25-year-old Canelo Alvarez of Mexico (far left) took the fight to Miguel Cotto of Puerto Rico last Saturday in Las Vegas, claiming the WBC middleweight title in a unanimous decision. The victory by Alvarez (46-1-1), whose only loss was to Floyd Mayweather Jr., sets up a bout with Gennady Golovkin, who is 34-0 and ranked No. 1 in the division.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOHN LOCHER
AP

INBOX

FOR NOV. 16, 2015



Protesting does not automatically put one on the correct side of an argument. Missouri's football players stood with a group insisting that three isolated incidents of stupidity on a 35,000-person campus represent systemic racism (SCORECARD). Frankly, they are wrong.

Nick Straatmann, Washington, Mo.

Missouri's football player protest took me back to the Black 14 at Wyoming in 1969, when 14 black players wanted to wear armbands in protest during a game against BYU. Cowboys coach Lloyd Eaton kicked them all off the team. So while there is still progress to be made, society has at least improved enough that the Missouri players could not only stage their protest but also see their demands realized.

Rusty Bradshaw, Phoenix



Bill Curry's first piece of advice for Clemson coach **Dabo Swinney** *(P.A.W. Patrol)*—"Be Dabo"—also happens to be a perfect acronym to describe him: Bold, Enthusiastic, Dedicated, Authentic, Battler, Optimistic.

Jerry Schwartz, Alpharetta, Ga.

Trumpeting American Pharoah as the only horse to win the Triple Crown and the Breeders' Cup Classic (CASE FOR . . .) is a bit misleading. The inaugural Classic was in 1984, six years after Affirmed won the last Triple Crown.

Jonathan Sigall, Forest Hills, N.Y.



COVER



Seeking and accepting help is the most courageous thing Michael Phelps *(A New Man)* will ever do—more inspiring than turning in a record time in the 400 IM or earning another gold medal. Having said that, I will be yelling my lungs out for him to win more gold in Rio.

Charlie Green
Hidden Hills, Calif.

I was concerned with one sentence in your story: "Phelps publicly vowed not to drink alcohol at least until the Olympic Games are finished." I would hope he learned better in rehab and that he stays away from that slippery slope.

Bill Morley
Sneads Ferry, N.C.

PAGE 64



POINT AFTER

Having retrieved this week's issue just after Veterans Day, I was dismayed by Michael Rosenberg's column on the Pentagon paying the NFL millions to do what ought to come naturally: Be patriotic.

Doug Thomas
Lancaster, Pa.

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Edited by **JIM GORANT** + **TED KEITH**

SCORECARD



DIEU NALIO CHERY/AP

Game Changer

A basketball-loving education secretary ensured that an emphasis on NCAA *student*-athletes will be an Obama administration legacy

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

BASKETBALL HAS been extravagantly good to Barack Obama. His first ball—a Christmas gift from his father during their last visit together, when he was 10—introduced him to the game that would help forge his racial identity as he grew up black in Hawaii. Obama scored points with his wife-to-be after Michelle Robinson's brother, Craig, a former star at Princeton, vetted him during a pickup game. In 2008 the candidate introduced himself to voters by playing in public, particularly in the hoops precincts of Indiana and North Carolina, the two reddest states he would flip to blue. And in office Obama actually used the sport to govern: After the balky rollout of the HealthCare.gov website, he enlisted NBA greats to rally sign-ups for the new health insurance exchanges, a push that helped save the Affordable Care Act.

But by the fourth quarter of his presidency Obama had steadily drifted off to golf, and today he no longer stands as the Basketball Man in his own administration. When Secretary of Education Arne Duncan leaves the cabinet next month—he plans to spend more time with his family and hopes to continue working in education—the president's longtime pickup buddy will do so as the most consequential basketball figure in Washington, on the court and off.

The former Harvard co-captain came to D.C. with a hoops résumé as colorful as it was distinguished. He played for the USBL's Rhode Island Gulls. He earned the nickname Cobra during four seasons as a professional in Australia. He helped Michael Jordan play back into shape for his 2001 comeback with the Washington Wizards. He had a cameo in *Benji*, the ESPN 30-for-30 documentary about slain Chicago high school star Ben Wilson, as the white guy in the background of game footage. And talk about your Common Core: As a Hoop It Up three-on-three player between 2004 and '13, he played on teams that won nine of 10 possible national championships.

In 2014 Duncan pulled off a double that would have been impressive for someone of any age, much less a 49-year-old bureaucrat. In February he won the MVP trophy in the Celebrity Game at NBA All-Star weekend, scoring 20 points, grabbing 11 rebounds and dishing out six assists, one of which—a blind flip over his shoulder to a cutting Skylar Diggins for a layup—went viral. Three months later, playing for Team Ariel, Duncan joined former Princeton center Mack Darrow and ex-Northwestern players Craig Moore and Jitim Young to win USA Basketball's national three-on-three championship. The title qualified Team Ariel for the FIBA 3x3 Worlds in Russia,



Playground Hero
Duncan dropped his jacket and practiced some basketball diplomacy during a visit to a Haitian high school in 2013.

though Duncan had to bow out for scheduling reasons. But the point had been made: Whatever his day job, Duncan doubled as the Secretary of Schoolin' People, the beau ideal of a pickup teammate. "He played with relaxed ferocity, combining opportunistic defense with slashing moves to the basket, shrewd passes and feathery hesitation jumpers," reported Carlo Rotella, a high school classmate of Duncan's at the University of Chicago Lab School, after playing in a noontime run with him in 2009.

The son of two white educators, Duncan nonetheless grew up under racially diverse circumstances, much like the president he has served. From the time Arne was a toddler his mother, Sue, took him with her to the after-school tutoring center she ran in a church basement on Chicago's South Side. Sue Duncan sometimes had to face down local gangs; one firebombed the center after the pastor refused a demand that it be used instead as an armory. Arne, then six, remembers the aftermath, carrying salvaged books to another church down the block.

Arne essentially grew up at "Sue's," bonding with local kids over basketball. By the time he reached his teens, he had begun to play farther afield, including on a court across from a crack house. "It was an extraordinary experience, not just to develop as a ballplayer, but to learn whom to trust and how to survive," Duncan says. "Obviously I was the outsider, and guys on the streets frankly protected me. To this day I owe my life to them. The community never let us down."

Duncan won broad respect as much for his even temper as for his game. John Rogers, who sponsored Team Ariel, remembers the day a fight broke out in a South Side gym. "Arne waded in like a referee does, and one of the guys punched him," he recalls. "The gym went silent. They got that guy out of there. There were like threats on his life because he'd punched Arne."

Duncan arrived at Harvard in 1982 lightly recruited and looking very Obamaesque—6' 2", scrawny, lefthanded. He started on the jayvee as a freshman, then made the varsity after sprouting three inches over the summer. Before his senior season he took a year off and returned to Chicago, to study why some ghetto kids make it and others don't. Using his mother's tutoring center as a base, he carved out time to coach and play between stretches of teaching, mentoring and interviewing. His findings wound up in a senior thesis, "The Values, Aspirations and Opportunities of the Urban Underclass," for Harvard's sociology department, which awarded him an A.B. magna cum laude.

In Cambridge the Harvard coaches noticed, Duncan would never call a foul during pickup games. To call one, remembered Steve Bzomowski, then a Crimson assistant, was "an excuse he did not want to use. Excuses equated to failure, and he just did not see things that way." As a cabinet secretary the former Chicago public schools chief would take flack from the left, for challenging teachers' unions; and from the right, for his support of Common Core standards. But if he seemed

impatient when a stakeholder in the world of education invoked some extenuating circumstance, perhaps it was just another example of his longtime aversion to excuses. "Arne Duncan was not a great talent, but boy, did he understand and see deep into the game," Bzomowski said. "I think he believed in the game and . . . that he could be very, very good at it even while others might not have thought so. Isn't that what great teachers, what great educators possess? The unwavering belief that their pupils can and should and will succeed."

In January 2010, Duncan took the NCAA itself to school. The organization had recently moved to bar from postseason play any program that failed to achieve a satisfactory Academic Progress Rate (APR), the metric that measured athletes' progress toward a degree. But the minimum was set too low to be much of a deterrent. At the NCAA convention in Atlanta, Duncan delivered an impassioned call for higher APR standards, ripping colleges that failed to graduate more players, especially African-American ones in revenue-producing sports.

His remarks resonated with an understanding of life on the far side of 47th Street, the dividing line between the world Duncan came home to each evening as a child and the one in which he spent his afternoons. A year later, when the NCAA tightened its minimums for postseason eligibility, Duncan knew he had been heard. "We pushed very hard for [a higher minimum] and actually made it happen," he notes. "We took some heat, but I'm proud of that."

In 2013 the University of Connecticut became the first major school to sit out an NCAA tournament for APR deficiencies in its men's basketball program. "A team that has 13 or 15% of its African-American guys graduate—you're just using those guys," Duncan told ESPN at the time. "We want to make sure that those teams that get rewarded by going to the tournament do the right thing by getting it done in the classroom first. . . . Everyone wants to go to a Division I school because they want to play in the tournament. [But if a school's] not eligible, I'm going to go someplace else. You have to change behavior."

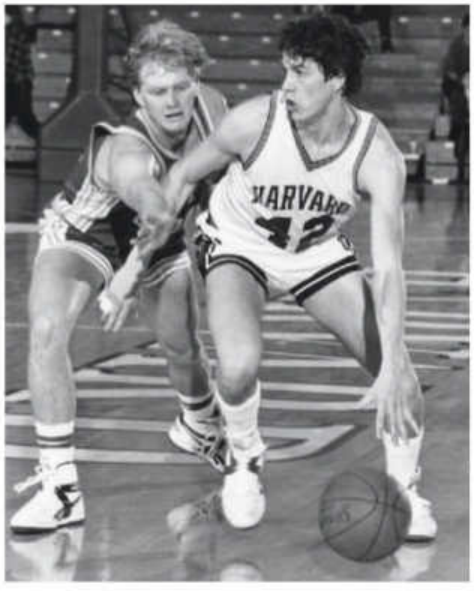
The Huskies returned to the tournament the next year, winning the national championship. On the victory podium after beating Kentucky, UConn guard Shabazz Napier told the nation, "This is what happens when you ban us!"

Yet the President and his Secretary of Education stood squarely with the spirit and intent of the modest academic expectations that had sidelined the Huskies the previous season. If anything, they wanted to see even stronger incentives and penalties. "The bar should be raised higher," Duncan says. "UConn, the poster child for not graduating players, is now graduating them. The battle's not won, but that was real progress."

Eight months later, in December 2014, Duncan discussed bipartisan legislation to establish a presidential commission to push college sports reform even further, including steps to address such issues as academic fraud, scholarship security and escalating coaches' salaries.

With Obama's time in office winding down, and Duncan returning to Chicago and his family—wife, Karen, daughter Claire and son Ryan—after the second-longest term of service of any member of the President's original cabinet, the work mandated by that proposed legislation will probably be left to another president and Congress. Duncan has nonetheless laid down a marker borne of a world he had seen and felt and touched.

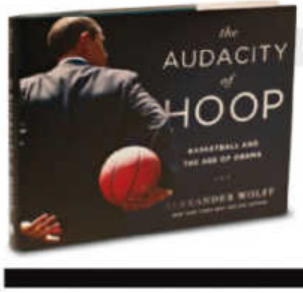
"This stuff is very personal to me," he says. "I grew up playing with guys who never graduated college, never made the NBA. They were on national TV, making millions for their universities, and now they're back on the streets. As a teenager, that got seared into my mind. To me, enriching universities and coaches and sponsors and TV, with nothing in return on the academic side, is morally unacceptable." □



Next
A co-captain at Harvard, Duncan went on to play four years as a pro, mostly in Australia.

COURTESY HARVARD ATHLETICS

By his teens, Duncan was playing on a court across from a crack house.



Adapted from *The Audacity of Hoop: Basketball and the Age of Obama* by Alexander Wolff. Used by permission of Temple University Press.



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@FURSTY, OLDEN | Tucked away in the Norwegian fjords, I spent the cold and quiet mornings by the water reading *The Martian* on my Kindle Paperwhite. The otherworldly landscape made each page feel as if I were on another planet.

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GO FIGURE



0:09

Time, in seconds, that elapsed in Sunday's MLS playoff game between Columbus and New York before the Crew's Justin Meram scored. It was the fastest goal in MLS playoff history. Columbus won 2–0.



$486,100

Amount paid by an investor in an eBay auction for a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle baseball card. It's the fourth time this year a '52 Mantle card has sold for more than a quarter-million dollars.

346

Weight, in pounds, of Chiefs defensive tackle Dontari Poe, who became the heaviest player with an NFL touchdown after he scored on a one-yard run against San Diego on Sunday.





SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Wisconsin's cheerleaders were forced to flee the field at Camp Randall Stadium when they were pelted with snowballs by *their own* fans.

Ryan Fitzpatrick
His Jets are 1–3 this month, but his face is totally winning Movember.



HOT ▲

NOT ▼



The Buckeyes
Their first loss in 24 games, and two stars said they were NFL-bound. Columbus abandons ship.

THEY SAID IT

"I'VE ALWAYS LIKED TO RUN AND DRINK BEER, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE CONSIDERED WORLD CLASS FOR DOING BOTH."



Lewis Kent

The 22-year-old student at the University of Western Ontario who set the record for the beer mile on Nov. 17 (4:51:90), then signed an endorsement deal with Brooks.

DORN BYG/CAL SPORT MEDIA/AP (MERAM); NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME (MANTLE); AARON M. SPRECHER/AP (POE); COURTESY OF TOM LIU (KENT); JEFF HANISCH/USA TODAY SPORTS (CHEERLEADER); TIM IRELAND/AP (FITZPATRICK); KHRIS HALE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP (URBAN MEYER)


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GOOSE BUMPS Ritzenhein was the top American in Boston last April.

MARATHON

A Dash Of Chilly

One of the top U.S. marathoners makes a run at the Olympics

AFTER FINISHING the 2012 U.S. Olympic Trials marathon, Dathan Ritzenhein walked off the course in Houston in shock and tears. He had crossed the line in fourth place, eight seconds short of qualifying for what would have been his third Olympics. He couldn't watch as Meb Keflezighi, Ryan Hall and Abdi Abdirahman celebrated making the U.S. team ahead of him. "I was completely deflated," Ritzenhein says. "I have some vivid memories from the later stages of really struggling but slowly gaining on Abdi. I never gave up until the end."

Ritzenhein rebounded five months later at the Olympic track and field trials, running the 10,000 and making the team. He placed 13th in London. Two months after that he ran a 2:07:47 personal best in the Chicago Marathon. Then the setbacks began: a hernia, several ankle injuries, a gluteal tear. "I've had a lot of *things*," Ritzenhein says, laughing. "I don't consider things injuries if I can still run."

He's finally healthy, and last April he finished as the top American at the Boston Marathon, in 2:11:20. Ritz, who grew up in Grand Rapids, moved back to Michigan to be closer to family two years ago and is now bracing for his second winter of training on his own after parting ways with coach Alberto Salazar. The weather can be difficult, but he usually makes a few trips to participate in warm-weather races and has access to the indoor facilities at Grand Valley State, where he coaches. A new Ritzenhein, who turns 33 next month, will show up to the Olympic trials in Los Angeles in February. "This lead-up is completely different," he says. "I've run quite a bit less, but the quality is very fast."

Speed is all he needs, because after his heartbreak in Houston, he has plenty of motivation.

—Christopher Chavez

EDGE

RITZ RECOMMENDS
Cold weather training tips from Dathan Ritzenhein



Lay it on

"A lot of people say, Wear one layer less than you need when you start. It's the opposite for me. I like to be warm when I start."



Don't sweat the pace

"Knowing that you have five pounds of clothes on, you don't have to hit the same times as in a workout on the perfect day."



Ground control

"You also have to know the terrain is going to be different and slower. Running a little slower doesn't mean you're any less fit or that you're getting less from a workout."

For more athlete training profiles and tips, go to *SI.com/edge*

STEVEN SENNE/AP; ICONS BY MARTIN LAKSMAN


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Sports Illustrated
HIGH SCHOOL
ATHLETE OF THE MONTH
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MCTELVIN AGIM, a senior defensive end at Hope (Ark.) High, is known simply as Sosa to his friends, coaches and anyone in the stands at Bobcats games on Friday nights, as the announcer repeats the moniker on play after play. The No. 1 recruit in the state and ninth in the country is the top defensive recruit ever to commit to Arkansas. At 6' 3", 278 pounds, he benches 405 and runs the 40 in 4.58 seconds. His stats off the field, though, are just as impressive: In a few weeks Sosa is set to graduate with a 3.80 GPA and 13 college credits already under his belt. Raised by a single mom and a village of female relatives, he credits his late grandmother, Charlie B. McGraw, with instilling in him a relentless work ethic. "You can't get complacent," he says. "That's when a downfall happens, and I refuse to be one of those people."

For more of Sosa's story, visit **SI.com/HSathlete**



EJ Perry | *Andover, Mass.* | *Football*

EJ, a junior quarterback at Andover High, completed 30 of 50 passes for a state-record 636 yards, throwing four touchdowns and rushing for two more in a 49–41 loss to Central Catholic High (Lawrence). The state's leader in passing yards (2,640) and second in TDs (29) this season, he is the first Massachusetts QB to surpass 600 yards in a game.



Sofia Rossi | *Akron, Ohio* | *Soccer*

Sofia, a junior forward at Walsh Jesuit High in Stow, scored in the 83rd minute for a 1–0 victory over Loveland High (Cincinnati), lifting the Warriors to their fourth straight Division I title. She netted the game-winner in the last two state championship matches as well. Ohio's D-I player of the year, Sofia had 28 goals and 12 assists this season.



Kris Silbaugh | *Cambridge Springs, Pa.* | *Football*

Kris, a senior wideout, punter and defensive back at Cambridge Springs High, who was born without a left hand, broke the Devils' career record for receiving yards on a 43-yard touchdown catch in a 63–0 win over Seagertown High in September. At season's end he had eight catches for 207 yards and two scores, bringing the career mark to 1,073.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **ALEXANDRA FENWICK**



Ella Byers | *Chamberlain, S.D.* | *Cross-country*

Ella, a freshman at Chamberlain High, finished the 5K course at Yankton Trail Park in Sioux Falls in 18:41.21 to win the Class A championship by 20.21 seconds, turning in the fastest time across all three classes. She won all 10 races she entered this season. Last year Ella competed for the Cubs as an eighth-grader and came in 10th in the state meet.



Jose Hernandez | *Mexico City* | *Soccer*

Hernandez, a midfielder at UCLA, was named the Pac-12 freshman of the year after leading the Bruins in scoring. Through Sunday he had 26 points on 11 goals and four assists and was one goal from tying the school's rookie record. Among Division I freshmen, Hernandez was tied for fourth in goals and fifth in points at week's end.



Ariel Stephenson | *Prince George, Va.* | *Basketball*

Stephenson, a 5' 10" freshman guard at Wake Forest, debuted with 21 points and seven rebounds in a 60–57 win over LSU, followed by 13 points and four boards in a 69–52 victory over East Tennessee State, and 16 points and six rebounds in a 77–58 win over Davidson. She is the career scoring leader for boys or girls at Prince George High (2,307).

ALEXANDRA FENWICK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (AGIM); ELAINE PINEAULT (PERRY); COURTESY OF MARIE ROSSI (ROSSI); ADELE SCHAEFER PHOTOGRAPHY (SILBAUGH); PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT (BYERS); DON LIEBIG (HERNANDEZ); WAKE FOREST ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS (STEPHENSON)

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JUST MY TYPE

→ *Interview by* **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *Did you know that Steve Kerr [the Warriors' official head coach] gets credit [in the record books] for all of the team's wins this season?*
LUKE WALTON: I am aware of that. The media keeps bringing it up. It's really not that big a deal in our camp.
DP: *How much communication do you have with Kerr?*
LW: A lot. Steve and I talk every day now. When he first left [in October, because of a back injury], we didn't talk very much. His main focus was on trying to get healthy. It was better not to ask him 20 questions a day.
DP: *When did you start thinking about being a head coach?*
LW: It first happened [during the 2009–10 season] in L.A., when I had a bad back injury and pretty much missed an entire season. Some of the doctors told me they didn't think I'd be able to play again at an NBA level. I was kind of depressed. [Former Lakers coach] Phil Jackson noticed and invited me into his coaching circle as a way to lift my spirits. He had me tracking stuff on the bench.
DP: *What was that first night like as a head coach?*
LW: It was awesome. Obviously, everything getting sprung on me the way it did, there were a lot of nerves and pressure and me just not wanting to mess up. You try to prepare yourself to do everything right. It's getting more comfortable and more fun.
DP: *Are you more amazed on a nightly basis by Steph Curry or by Kobe in his prime?*
LW: It's different. When you're talking about players that good, it's different. I was part of the game [in '06, against the Raptors] in which Kobe scored 81 points. That was one of the most spectacular things I've ever seen. Then you see Steph doing it. He's 6' 3", 190 pounds. He's the best player in the NBA right now. It's incredible, in a league full of these huge, athletic, strong people, that this guy is the best.
DP: *Have you ever yelled at Steph?*
LW: No. You don't need to yell at him. He's one of the best people I've ever been around. He's always trying to do the right thing. There are times you have to talk to him because things aren't going right. But you don't have to get upset with him.
DP: *Not to diminish what you've done, but could I coach this group of players to a win?*
LW: I'm sure you could, but you're not just anybody. You're a sports *genius*.
DP: *What if I asked to be a player-coach?*
LW: If you're planning on playing yourself, the team is not going to win that game. □



LUKE WALTON

CREDIT CHECK

The 35-year-old former NBA forward and current Warriors interim head coach has Golden State off to its best start in franchise history (15–0). Unfortunately for him, the numbers don't count.

GUEST SHOTS

SAY WHAT?



I asked Bears offensive lineman **Kyle Long** who people often say he looks like. "Bull from [the '80s TV show] *Night Court*," Long said. "[Bears running back] Matt Forte calls me that. I also get [professional wrestler] Goldberg. The lack of creativity in the doppelgänger department drives me crazy." . . . Hornets



center **Frank Kaminsky** is not having much success with fantasy football this season. "I have the worst team in the league," Kaminsky told me. "The only game I won this year was because the other team forgot to put in their quarterback." . . .



Dolphins QB **Ryan Tannehill** isn't exactly taking advantage of the Miami nightlife. "I go to bed early," said the 27-year-old Tannehill. "I'm an old man. I try to be asleep by 9:30. My wife [Lauren] is just as bad as me. We live like we're 95 years old."

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PATRICK); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (WALTON); JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (LONG); KEN SMITH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (KAMINSKY); ROBIN MARCHANT/GETTY IMAGES FOR ESPN (TANNEHILL)







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For the next two weeks THE CASE FOR . . . *will feature a Sportsman of the Year candidate. Find more nominees at* **SI.com/sportsman**



The Case for . . .
Steph Curry

BY LEE JENKINS

EVERY SO OFTEN the basketball gods open the door to the Zone. There is no telling who will be granted access and how long he will be allowed to stay. Great shooters can remain for a quarter, a half, even an entire game. The best ones may take up residence for a week. A few immortal marksmen have been known to move in for a month.

Warriors point guard Steph Curry has lived in this exclusive fun house all year. He was there when he splashed a record 286 three-pointers last season and a record 98 in the playoffs, 40 more than the previous mark. He was there when he sank the tying corner three with his eyes closed in Game 3 of the first round against New Orleans, while getting knocked down by two Pelicans. He was there when he delivered a heartfelt MVP speech, as his family wept, and when he conducted a hilarious press conference as his daughter jeered. He was there when he drained the double-crossover step-back three against Cavaliers guard Matthew Dellavedova in the Finals. And he was there when he smoked that sweet victory cigar on a downtown Cleveland street corner at 4 a.m.

Police officers that June morning asked Curry if he wanted them to shield him from passersby. They must not have noticed that he was surrounded by his own force field. No one could touch him—not Anthony Davis, not James Harden, not LeBron James, all vanquished with a velvety flick of the wrist, en route to Golden State's first championship in 40 years. Rookie coach Steve Kerr was a genius. Two-year-old Riley Curry was a celebrity. The Warriors won more games last season, playoffs included, than any team that did not employ Michael Jordan ever has. All this was made possible because Steph never left the Zone.

It is tempting to suggest that Curry rode a 12-month hot streak, as if he will eventually regress to some imaginary mean. But Curry has moved the mean. The streak is not stopping. Curry is the rare player—the *only* player?—who doesn't need an invitation from the gods. He owns the Zone. That much became clear this fall, when Curry returned from a four-month cooling-off period and scored 40 points against the Pelicans on opening night, then 53 against them four days later. This isn't a streak. This is the 2015 Sportsman of the Year, with a head start on 2016 as well.

> He is a showman and a winner, a joy to watch and a terror to guard, the best reason in modern sports to buy a ticket.

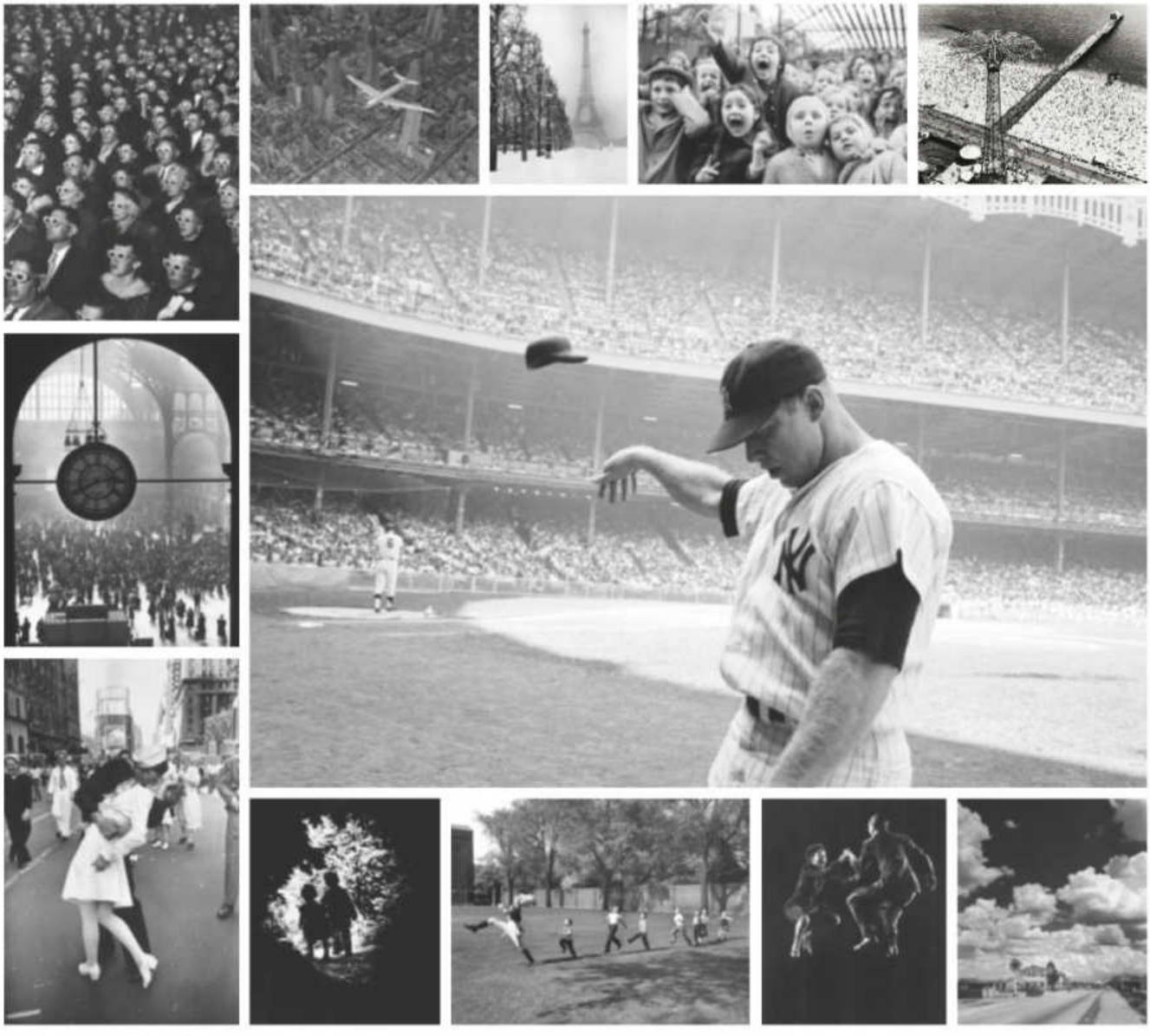
Curry's appeal stretches beyond his limitless range and uncanny accuracy. He is polished but not manufactured, devout but not overbearing, outgoing but not annoying. He doesn't look all that different from the 27-year-old unleashing fadeaways at the park. He doesn't act all that different from the young father lip-synching *Frozen* songs in the house. He actually did that, with wife Ayesha, and they posted the video on Instagram. Yes, the flamethrower who incinerates the NBA also reprises Prince Hans in "Love Is an Open Door."

The quality that distinguishes him, beyond sublime hand-eye coordination, is brimming confidence. He'll pull up from 25 feet when he has a two-on-one fast break. He'll let fly when a 7-footer is in his jersey. He'll dribble circles around three defenders and then thread a no-look pass. He makes the plays that others imagine but don't dare try. He is a showman and a winner, a joy to watch and a terror to guard, the best reason in modern sports to buy a ticket.

Curry floats around the perimeter, teasing opponents with jukes and fakes. He is searching for space—just enough to kick those Under Armours and flick those wrists. There is an inevitability to his game, an overriding sense that he will find the space, he will make the shot, he will point to the sky, he will stay in the Zone. □

STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES

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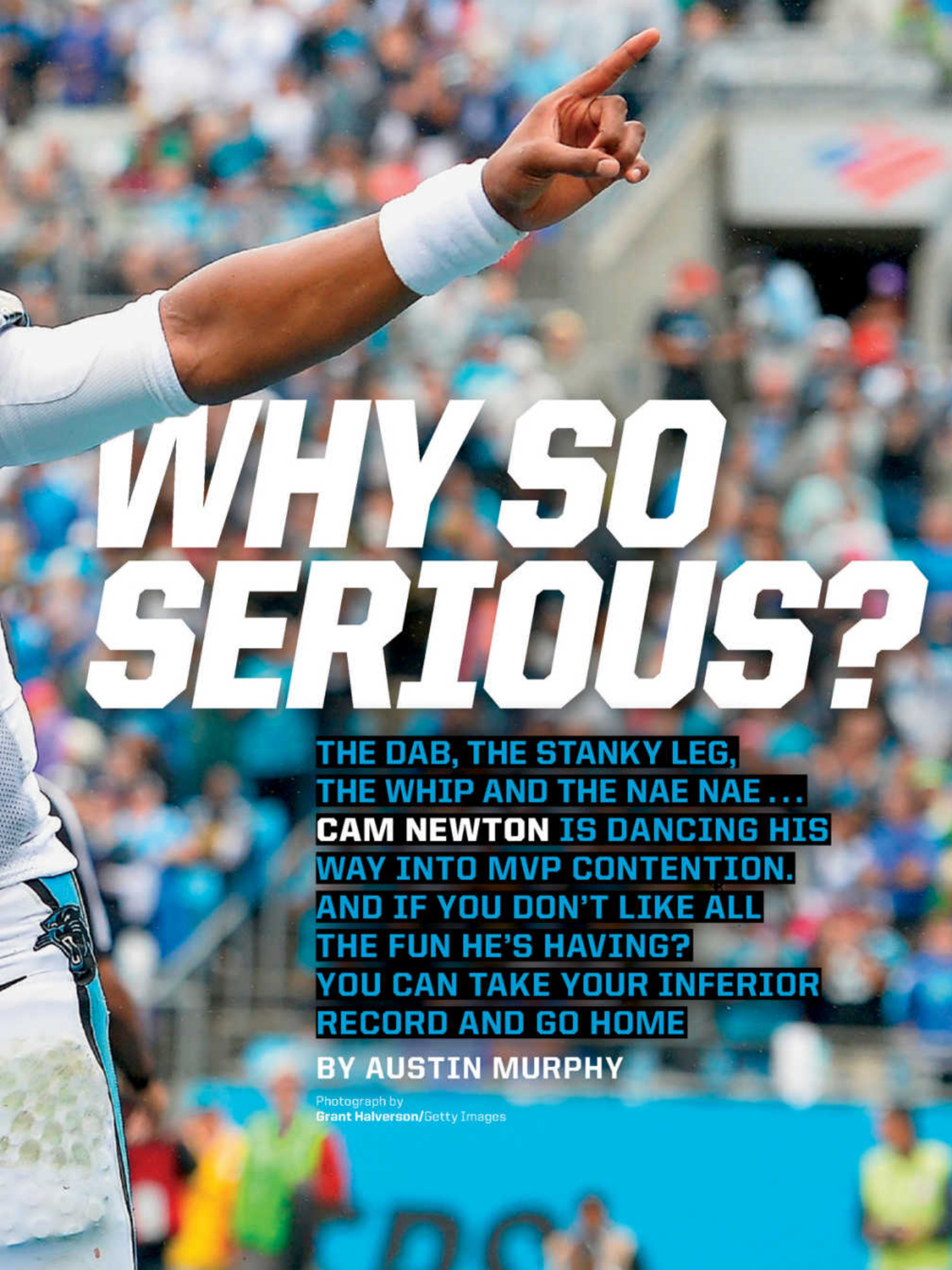


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WHY SO SERIOUS?

THE DAB, THE STANKY LEG, THE WHIP AND THE NAE NAE . . . CAM NEWTON IS DANCING HIS WAY INTO MVP CONTENTION. AND IF YOU DON'T LIKE ALL THE FUN HE'S HAVING? YOU CAN TAKE YOUR INFERIOR RECORD AND GO HOME

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

Photograph by
Grant Halverson/Getty Images

WE HAVE SEEN Fun Cam, Mischievous Cam and Sulking Cam, although that last version of Panthers quarterback Cam Newton seems to have gone missing over the past few seasons. And here in the interview room following Carolina's 44–16, all-phases-of-the-game ass-whuppin' of Washington on Sunday was Willfully Milquetoast Cam. His franchise-record-tying five touchdown passes—to five different pass catchers—were "a tribute" to coach Ron Rivera, said Newton, who then warned against complacency. Sure the Panthers are 10–0, but take his word for it: They've got warts! "Winning covers up a lot of [mistakes], and we can't get lax," Newton warned. "We have to get prepared for Dallas"—Carolina's Thanksgiving Day opponent.

For a player who wears a Superman T-shirt under his jersey, who dabbled this off-season in Aussie Rules Football and something called "knockerball," who spent a good portion of last week discussing his dance moves, and who is described by Panthers center Ryan Kalil as "a huge 12-year-old running around in a grown man's body," Newton was downright staid and businesslike.

. . . Well. As staid and businesslike as a person can be while rocking gold-glitter hightops and designer jeans from which dangle a fluffy, two-foot-long fox tail.

GUESS WHO'S coming to dinner, taking his place at the table alongside the NFL's elite QBs, Tom Brady, Aaron Rodgers, Drew Brees and Carson Palmer? Andrew Luck has stepped out of the room to take a call, but we expect him back shortly. Pull up a chair, Cam. Feel free to take the one vacated recently by Peyton Manning.

Do you have a problem with Newton's presence at this figurative repast? True, all of those P3s (prototypical pocket passers) have higher quarterback ratings and completion percentages. Only one, however, could match Newton's record this season. (Going into New England's Monday-night game against Buffalo, Brady's Patriots were the only other undefeated NFL team.) And none can match his uniquely formidable skill set. In his fifth season as a pro a light has gone on for Newton: He's emerged as a very good—if occasionally inconsistent—pocket passer. And one who's played his best in clutch moments.

When not airing it out, Newton remains a potent, punishing rushing threat—a recurring 6' 5", 245-pound nightmare for cornerbacks who must come up in run support. Of his 86 rushes for 382 yards this season, 34 have resulted in first downs, good for a league-leading 39.5%. "He's just so *dual*," effuses Josh Norman, the Panthers' Pro Bowl–bound cornerback who famously scuffled with Newton in training camp. "You think you got him contained in the pocket? He's gonna run for the first down. Next play he'll throw it over the top and break your back."

It's what happens *after* Newton scores that tends to raise hackles across the republic. Following his game-clinching touchdown run against the Titans in Week 10—Newton scored by stretching his seemingly elastic right arm, then punching the plane, ball snugly enveloped in his giant hand—he launched into a sequence of hip-hop moves that included the Dab (which, when performed with less panache, looks like someone sneezing into the crook of their elbow). This crisply choreographed number irked, among others, Tennessee linebacker Avery Williamson, who exchanged heated words with Newton in the end zone, and Titans interim coach Mike Mularkey, who contended that the QB had violated some unwritten "code of ethics."

Williamson, for his part, didn't have a leg to stand on: After sacking Newton earlier in the game, he'd busted out an admirably tight rendition of Drake's "Hotline Bling" dance. And Mularkey didn't specify precisely which part of the "code" Newton had violated—possibly because that too is elastic. While it's perfectly fine for Rodgers to celebrate TDs by clamping on an invisible championship belt, where Brady's profane rants are seen as evidence of his passion, Newton's dancing is over the top, unsportsmanlike, in poor taste. It confuses children.

This, at least, was the contention of one aggrieved mother, who complained in a letter to *The Charlotte Observer* that as spectators in the end zone at Tennessee's Nissan Stadium, she and her nine-year-old daughter had been subjected to Newton's "chest puffs" and "pelvic thrusts," his "arrogant struts" and "taunting." (Upon further review, Newton had performed zero pelvic thrusts, leaving open the possibility that the letter writer had engaged in wishful thinking.)



ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

38.3
Newton's rushing yards per game in '15, No. 2 among QBs. No passer is even close to his 2,937 yards since he arrived in '11.

39
Career rushing TDs, already within striking distance of Steve Young's QB record of 43 (which Young took 15 seasons to reach).

WHILE IT'S FINE FOR RODGERS TO CELEBRAT

INVISIBLE CHAMPI



E TDS BY CLAMPING ON AN

ONSHIP BELT, NEWTON'S DANCING IS SEEN AS OVER THE TOP.

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Some found the letter more objectionable than anything Newton did on the field. "What this woman *might* have told her daughter," says George Whitfield Jr., the passing coach who directed Newton's draft prep, and who considers the QB "like family," was something along the lines of: "What you're seeing is an expression of excitement and exuberance by a player who worked his butt off for that moment, and who has earned the right to enjoy it. Incidentally, he is a preacher's son who has no police record, has never touched alcohol and does not use foul language. His celebrations are always fun, never nasty. And when he's finished, he gives the football to a small child or some other fan."

Ravens wideout Steve Smith has played 15 NFL seasons; he was Newton's teammate for three years in Carolina. He's familiar with a different, unwritten code. "When people talk about an *athletic* quarterback, they usually mean *black*," he says. "The same way that if they're describing a defensive end as a *high-motor* guy, that player is probably white."

CAM-DO ATTITUDE
Newton found himself at a career apex Sunday: His five TD passes against Washington were two more than he'd thrown in any previous game.

Another edict of that code governs the behavior of the men who play certain positions. "People expect the quarterback to act a certain way," says Smith, who ruptured an Achilles tendon and is out for the season. "They see Cam doing what, in their minds, a QB is not supposed to do. And it makes them uncomfortable."

While the outrage attending Newton's antics seems selective and manufactured, it must be admitted that his more florid celebrations *do* drag on. If he played baseball, one suspects, his home run trot would begin with a series of back handsprings, after which he would circle the bases doing Deion Sanders's Prime Time shuffle.

By Newton's way of thinking, no umbrage should be taken, because no disrespect is intended. "We all know I'm a kid at heart," he says. "I try to make my game kidlike, so people will see that I enjoy what I do. I can't repeat it enough, I'm not [celebrating] to be disrespectful to anybody."

It all comes down to this: Newton does not traffic in false modesty. He's paid a price for that. He reaped a whirlwind of grief for telling SI's Peter King before the 2011 draft, "I see myself not only as a football player but an entertainer and icon."

Newton objected, saying the quote had been taken out of context. And he got clobbered for it. But guess what? Five years later he's three-for-three: an iconic figure in the NFL, the rare athlete who transcends his sport. There was far less blowback this off-season when Newton told a Charlotte TV reporter, "I say this with the utmost humility, but I don't think nobody has ever been who I'm trying to be. Nobody has the size, nobody has the speed, nobody has the arm strength, nobody has the intangibles."

It's not boasting when you back it up. This year Newton is backing it up.

FORTY MINUTES before kickoff at Charlotte's Bank of America Stadium on Sunday, two quarterbacks stood on opposite 40-yard lines. On the Panthers' end, Newton was inside a raucous circle formed by his receiving corps. Turning counterclockwise, he high-fived his guys—Devin Funchess, Ted Ginn Jr., Jerricho Cotchery—inside this impromptu wheel of fortune.

On the other 40, closer to midfield, stood a solitary figure in burgundy warmups. Robert Griffin III crossed his arms to ward off the chill.

Three years removed from his selection as the NFL's Offensive Rookie of the Year, he is now the Redskins' third-string quarterback. That same season, 2012, saw a fleet, biceps-kissing signal-caller lead the 49ers to Super Bowl XLVII. RG3 and Kap were doing nothing less, it seemed, than revolutionizing the quarterback position.

But not all dual-threat QBs were catching the wave. Newton, for his part, was struggling through a second-year slump, the nadir of which came during a lopsided loss to the Giants (the second of nine defeats in a 12-game stretch). Yanked late in that outing, he was sitting on the bench when Smith, a team captain, got up in his grill, lecturing: "You can get some mental reps—or you can sit on that bench and sulk."

Newton took the criticism to heart. Three years later the dozen or so teammates and coaches to whom SI spoke for this story agree that his work habits are first-rate. "His preparation, his study habits—that's never been an issue here," says tight end Greg Olsen. As Newton improved, Griffin and Kaepernick regressed. On a weekend in which RG3 was inactive (for the fourth time this season) and Kaepernick was put on injured reserve (likely signaling the end of his time in San Francisco), Newton completed 21 of his 34 passes against Washington for 246 yards, five touchdowns and zero picks. Several times he moved the chains with jaw-dropping scrambles. With that afternoon's work he thrust himself further into the MVP conversation. While Brady is the front-runner in most zip codes outside of Mecklenburg County, N.C., Newton is second. And closing.

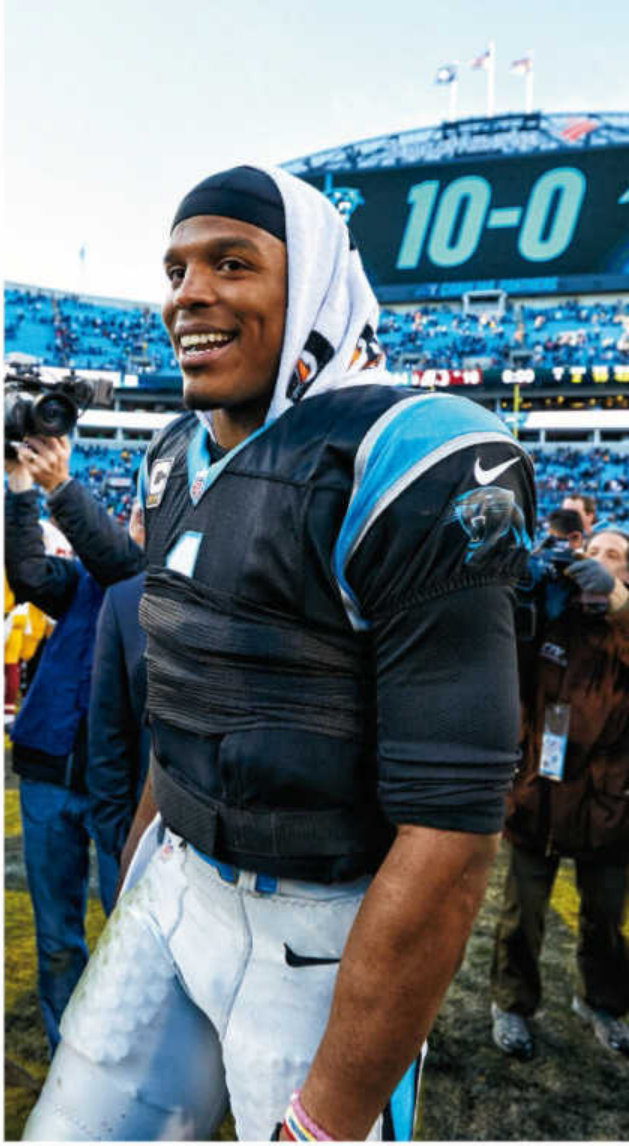
Slo-mo replays of a 23-yard Newton scramble against the Packers on Nov. 8 appeared to show him *smiling* in the moments before he was hit. "I *was* smiling," he later reported. With a smile. "If you're not having fun, what's the purpose of you being out there?"

His pleasure manifests in different ways at different times. Three weeks earlier, in the fourth quarter against the Seahawks, recalls Trevor Moawad, a mental conditioning coach who has worked with Newton, the QB seemed to be exhibiting "the enjoyment that an assassin takes in his work." That game was a watershed for Newton, who'd never before beaten Seattle and was having, through three-plus quarters, his worst outing of the season. But in the final nine minutes he engineered *two* 80-yard TD drives, wiping out a nine-point deficit and shifting, possibly, the balance of power in the NFC.

To better understand Newton's passing success this season, look how this team is running the ball. Carolina's 139.9 yards per game is fifth best in the league. "Running makes everything easier," says marauding middle linebacker Luke Kuechly. "The more time of possession [the offense] gets, it makes our job easier. It eats clock and opens up the passing game for Cam."

Newton, of course, is himself part of the reason Carolina's running attack thrives. "Being the physical and athletic freak that he is," says Greg Cosell, a senior producer and analyst at NFL Films, "Cam allows the Panthers to have the most diverse and multidimensional run game in the NFL. They incorporate more option principles in their run game than any team in the league. That puts tremendous stress on the defense, particularly second-level players."

Offensive coordinator Mike Shula has done a superb job designing an attack tailored to Newton's strengths. One of those is his ability to execute the zone read, which Newton ran at Auburn. That is not to say, as Cosell points out, that Newton is at all "a run-around guy." Griffin



"NEWTON LOVES SUPERHEROES, AND IN CERT

KING. "HE'S STRONG,



and Kaepernick were run-around guys. Newton, for the most part, "plays the game from the pocket," high praise from Cosell, a P3 proponent who has seen steady, if not dramatic improvement in the QB's passing. His completion percentage (56.9 in 2015—28th in the NFL) will never rival that of, say, Brady, because the two QBs operate different attacks. "Where Brady is rattling off short completions—nine yards, six yards, eight yards; *bing! bing! bing!*—the Panthers are more of a downfield team. Cam throws at the intermediate level, the 19- and 21-yard dig routes."

While their styles are different, Newton this season has been able to summon a kind of Brady-esque alchemy, conjuring extraordinary production from a receiving corps that can generously be described as ordinary. Weakened by the preseason loss of WR1 Kelvin Benjamin (ACL), that group has been much better than expected. It helps that No. 1 has had time to find them: Carolina's offensive line, a Superfund site for much of last season, has been surprisingly stalwart to date.



STOMP ON BY
With all the smiles and celebrations, critics miss this: Newton spends just as much time getting a positive message across to his young fans.

AIN WAYS HE *IS* ONE," SAYS

HE'S FAST, AND HE'S GOT A BIG HEART FOR PEOPLE."

What else? The defense has been ferocious and larcenous: Carolina's fourth-ranked D has forced a league-high 25 turnovers this season, including five against woebegone Washington, which eked out just 14 rushing yards and nine first downs.

"Are we the most talented team in the league? Absolutely not," Newton allows. "But we have the potential to be the best." It helps, too, that the quarterback is enjoying much better health this year than last. After undergoing left-ankle surgery in March 2014, he broke a rib in a preseason game against New England. Four months later he fractured two transverse process bones in his lower back in a car crash.

From the Dec. 9, 2014, *Charlotte Observer*: "The violent collision shortly after noon sent Newton's black Dodge truck tumbling sideways across a bridge over Interstate 277 in uptown Charlotte. The truck came to rest on the passenger side, its roof flattened. Newton, who had been headed to Bank of America Stadium a block away to study game film on a day off, appeared dazed after crawling out a shattered rear window."

WITH THE anniversary of that wreck approaching, Newton donned his city planner's hat last week. Speaking with reporters four days before the Redskins game, he agitated for a stoplight to be installed at the aforementioned intersection. The right of way is unclear, he insisted. Other accidents had occurred at the same spot.

It was pointed out to him that a bigger stop sign had been installed. "If people are still getting into accidents," he insisted, "it's not better."

You'd think, what with preparing for Washington's blitz packages, he might have limited bandwidth for traffic-flow issues. But Newton, remember, sees his purpose as larger than football. He recently thanked the Almighty "for putting me on this pinnacle, that I can shine light to other people." By winning football games, yes—but in other ways, as well. With his so-called "Sunday giveaway," in which Newton hands the football to a fan, preferably a young kid, after Panthers touchdowns. But also by making the streets safer for his fellow citizens. He genuinely wants this traffic light, saying, "I'm just trying to find ways to make the city better."

"He loves superheroes, and in certain ways he *is* one," says Cedric King, a retired Army master sergeant who served with the 82nd Airborne, and whom Newton describes as a good friend. "He's strong, he's fast, and he's got a big heart for people."

King first met the Panthers the day before they visited the Redskins back in 2012. The team was 1–6. "They were going through tough times, and so was I," he recalls. King had stepped on an IED in Afghanistan and lost both his legs, one above the knee, one below. He was a patient at Walter Reed Hospital when Rivera invited him to meet the team at its hotel in Washington, D.C. King took a taxi over and told the driver to wait for him.

Seven hours later King was still inside, hanging out with the Panthers. So inspiring did Rivera find King and his story that he asked the soldier to address his team. King turned out to be a natural at public speaking. He's addressed the Panthers several times since and gives motivational speeches across the country.

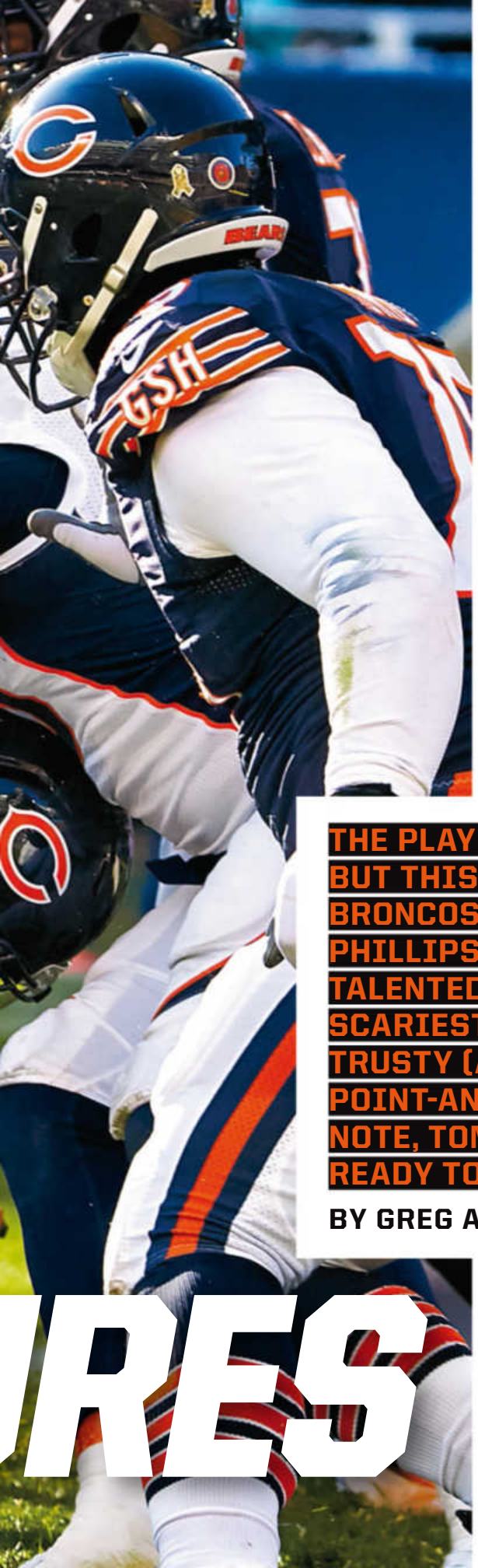
He often talks about the ingredients of leadership. One of them, he says, is the ability "to elevate the performance of the people around you." You may not care for Newton's shtick, his gaudy touchdown numbers, his dramatic semaphoring after first downs. But there's no denying that he lifts the play of those around him.

"Cam's energy is contagious; guys feed off it," says Kalil. "Some people prefer a more traditional quarterback, and that's fine. But Cam is our guy, and this works for our team. We love it." □

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2); ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES (DANCING)



SIMPLE PLEASU



BRONCS, CHEER!
Denver hasn't seen a D this stingy since the Orange Crush: The Broncos' 6.4 scrimmage yards allowed per touch are a 37-year team low.

Photograph by **David E. Klutho** For Sports Illustrated

THE PLAYERS LOOK FAMILIAR, BUT THIS IS *NOT* THE SAME BRONCOS DEFENSE: WADE PHILLIPS HAS TURNED A TALENTED GROUP INTO THE NFL'S SCARIEST UNIT WITH HIS TRUSTY (AND WELL-TRAVELED) POINT-AND-SHOOT SCHEME. TAKE NOTE, TOM BRADY—DENVER IS READY TO BRING THE PLAIN

BY GREG A. BEDARD

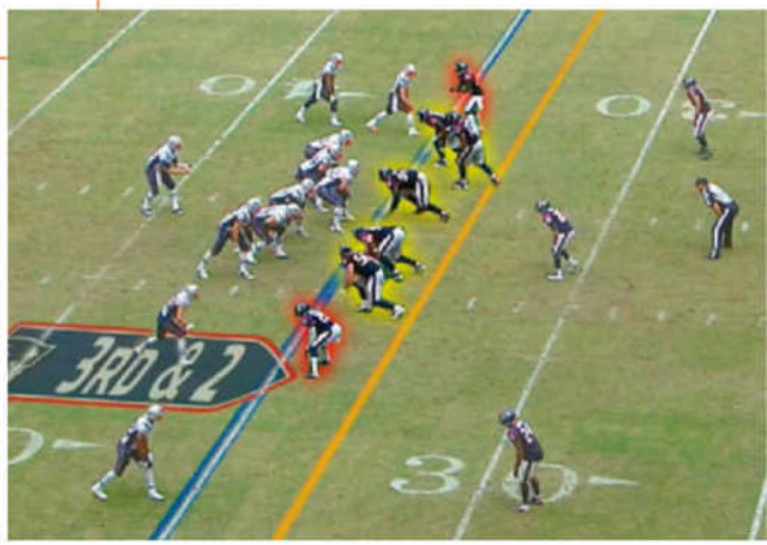
BY THE TIME you read this you will have no doubt heard a week's worth of questioning and armchair quarterbacking about Sunday's Patriots-Broncos showdown in Denver. *Why isn't Peyton Manning facing Tom Brady for a 17th time? Is Manning really hurt? Or is it just his pride that's reeling? Are his rib and foot injuries merely giving coach Gary Kubiak cover to go with the quarterback, Brock Osweiler, who can best run his offense?*

In reality, Kubiak probably doesn't care much which QB starts. He knows the identity of his team comes from coordinator Wade Phillips's relentless, in-your-face defense. Denver is so good on that side of the ball this season—eight of 10 opposing QBs have been held to a single passing TD or less; in only one game has a foe rushed for multiple TDs—that it might not matter which QB Kubiak sends out on Sunday.

If you've followed Phillips's long and winding career—earning his master's degree in football from his legendary father, Bum; crossing paths with some of the game's greatest minds, from Bear Bryant to Bill Yeoman—this should come as no surprise. The proud East Texas native may appear as if he just fell off the turnip truck (the aw-shucks attitude and lingering twang, the Kris Kringle physique and tussled, snow-white hair), but that belies the truth, that he should be mentioned as one of the NFL's top defensive minds.

Phillips's track record speaks for itself. Since leaving the Eagles, where for three years he coordinated Buddy Ryan's defense, following the 1988 season, Phillips has immediately improved every unit he's been a part of in terms of points and yards allowed. Whether it was the Broncos the first time around ('89–94), the Bills (1995–2000), the Falcons ('02–03), the Chargers ('04–06), the Cowboys ('07–10), the Texans ('11–13) or, now, back in Denver, Phillips has been the man for any team in need of an instant fix.

"Wade does a great job of instilling confidence in his players," says Patrick Kerney, a retired All-Pro defensive end who blossomed under Phillips's guidance in Atlanta. "This stems less from his great track record (nine times his defenses have



ranked in the Top 5 in yards allowed) than from his ability to project a sincere belief in his guys. We couldn't help but want to go out there every day and work to validate his opinion of us."

And the fact is, these Broncos needed a change on defense, even if that wasn't apparent. Denver's coordinator over the past three years, Jack Del Rio (whom the Raiders hired as their coach in the off-season), employed a scheme that worked just fine, especially when buttressed by a historically explosive offense. And he got results; Denver was No. 3 in yards allowed last season, No. 16 in points. But his defense lacked imagination and, more important, came up short against the best quarterbacks, including Brady. In nine games between his stints in Denver and Jacksonville (where he was previously the head coach), Del Rio beat Brady only once. And that lone victory came in the AFC championship game following the 2013 season, where Manning led the highest-scoring offense of the modern era and Brady made do with the likes of Matthew Mulligan and Michael Hoomanawanui.

Phillips's track record against Brady (1–5) isn't much better, but to be fair, it would look a lot healthier had the Chargers' Marlon McCree not fumbled away a late fourth-down interception that should have buried the Pats in the 2006 divisional playoffs.

History aside, Phillips has never battled Brady with a defense this strong on all three levels. Up front, Denver brings the twin-terror pass-rushing duo of Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware, who have combined for 12½ sacks (that despite Ware's two-game absence for a back problem). They are aided inside by linemen Malik Jackson, Sylvester Williams and Antonio Smith (nine combined sacks). Brandon Marshall and Danny Trevathan are excellent run-and-hit linebackers, and strong safety T.J. Ward is a physical playmaker. In back there may not be a better corner duo in the NFL than Aqib Talib and Chris Harris Jr., who have turned their in-your-face man coverage into three pick-sixes. Second-year nickelback Bradley Roby has the look of a future No. 1 press corner, and David Bruton is underrated as a do-everything defensive back.

"We believe we have the mix to compete with anybody in this league," says Marshall. "That's where [Phillips has] our confidence level."



And that shows on paper. Through Sunday, the Broncos rank first in the NFL in total defense (284.3 yards per game), pass defense (190.6), points allowed (18.3) and total sacks (34); second in opposing passer rating (74.2); and seventh in rushing defense (93.7). Now imagine how that might look if Denver's offense wasn't tied for 25th in the league with 1.9 giveaways per game and wasn't rated dead last in Football Outsiders' formula, which factors in opponent and league averages.

In short, the Broncos' defense has been playing with an offensive piano strapped to its back this season. And still it has flourished.

Here's the thing: Phillips has done that with nearly the same personnel Del Rio had. "The same players," says Marshall. "You look at [how the] stats jumped. . . . I think that's a testament to Wade."

DENVER'S D HAS BEEN PLAYING WITH AN OFF

TO ITS BACK: 25TH IN GIVE

THE DIFFERENCES between Del Rio's scheme in Denver and Phillips's approach under Kubiak are fairly simple. For the most part, Del Rio ran a two-gap, 4–3/3–4 hybrid predicated on linemen occupying blockers by playing the gaps on either side of them, especially on early downs. Coverages varied, but there wasn't a lot of the in-the-receiver's-grill press-man that today's defenses use to thwart precision passers, and there was hardly any blitzing. The Broncos ranked 26th in the league last year with a 22.8 blitz percentage, according to Pro Football Focus.

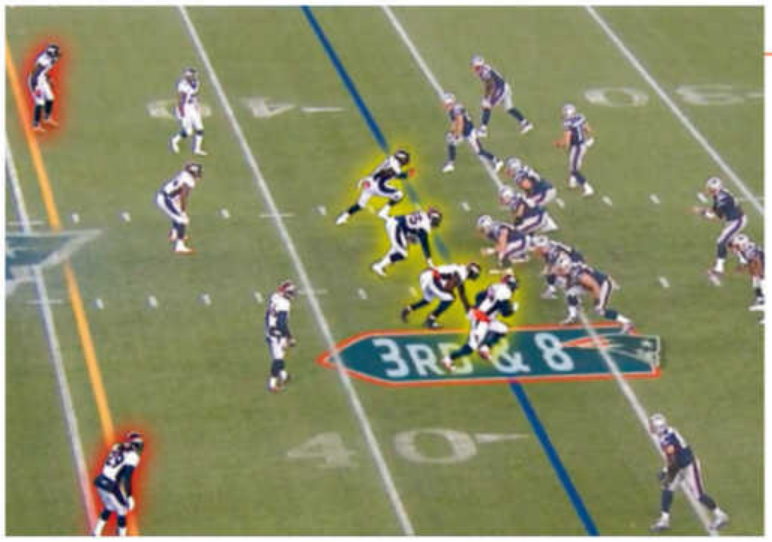
By contrast, Phillips employs a 3–4, one-gap system, which allows players to be aggressive and penetrate holes. He also sends an extra rusher about 40% of the time, fourth-most in the NFL. Phillips is not afraid to put Talib and Harris in bump-and-run coverage all over the field.

The beauty in Phillips's scheme—and the reason his units have instant success with it—is that it isn't very complicated. By keeping things simple, players don't have to think as much as they did under Del Rio, and they can play faster. "[Today's] offenses are so complicated, it's amazing," says Phillips. "If you try to match that as a defense, you're going to get confused. I've always thought: If a guy thinks [his task] is easy to do, he will play better."

"Wade uses his guys' abilities more than he's looking to outscheme a team," says Ware, who knows his coach better than anyone on the Broncos' defense after playing for him in Dallas for four years. "He's more

NFL GAME PASS (2); DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PHILLIPS)

WADE'S WORLD
The difference between Phillips (whose Houston D took on Brady in 2013, left) and his predecessor, Del Rio (whose unit conceded a big catch to Amendola in '14, right): Phillips is more likely to go after the QB and press the Pats' WRs at the line. Del Rio was inclined to sit back and scheme.



ENSIVE PIANO STRAPPED
AWAYS AND RATED DEAD LAST BY FOOTBALL OUTSIDERS.

about man-on-man—*this is what we're doing, these are the checks we need to make*. Mentally, that makes things a lot more simple. From a physical standpoint, it allows you to key on tendencies and what the opponent is doing. It brings out more of the killer instinct in a guy."

It also tends to make opposing QBs feel like they're under constant pressure, and that should be particularly helpful against Brady on Sunday. In Week 9 against the Patriots last year, the Broncos fell behind 27–7 but had a chance to make things interesting in the second half when Denver's first drive cut the deficit to 13. A third-and-eight play with 9:52 left in the third quarter, however, illustrates why Del Rio's scheme had a hard time with a cerebral quarterback like Brady and, ultimately, why Denver was doomed.

With the Patriots in trips right, the Broncos gave a zone look with two deep safeties. Each of the cornerbacks was between five and seven yards off his receiver. On the snap, Denver rushed its usual four linemen and moved into a Cover 3 zone, with the two outside corners and the free safety playing conservatively deep on top of the receivers. Brady easily identified the coverage, scrambled to his right and hit Danny Amendola in a huge void between four defenders—21 yards and a first down en route to a field goal that stretched the lead back to 16.

Phillips will not make life that easy for Brady. The last time he faced the Patriots was during the 2013 season when, despite being in the middle of a 14-game losing streak that would get Phillips and his coach (Kubiak) fired, his Texans lost, barely, 34–31. With New England facing third-and-two on Houston's 35-yard line with 3:20 remaining and the score tied, the Texans had four defenders standing within four yards of the line of scrimmage and two down linemen. They played press-man coverage against the two slot receivers, and played off-man coverage on the outside, with one deep safety. At the snap, Phillips sent an extra rusher to force Brady into a quick decision. With man coverage against every receiver, Brady threw a near-perfect pass to tight end Rob Gronkowski, but it was broken up by Brandon Harris, who was playing aggressively as a linebacker in Houston's sub package.

Del Rio played Brady conservatively. Phillips pressed the issue by speeding up the quarterback.

"I love Del Rio because he gave me my first opportunity in this league, but his scheme is read-and-react; you have to think a little," says Marshall. "Wade calls a simple defense. There's not a whole lot of thinking; we're able to just *go*. He allows us to play extremely fast and extremely aggressive."

"I think we're put in better spots this year," says Jackson. "Del Rio had a good defense—I just think this one fits us better."

WATCHING PHILLIPS'S defense in action—the way it bullied Bears quarterback Jay Cutler on Sunday into an interception, two sacks and a crucial fumble—you would think that he leads aggressively, gets after his players. That's not the case. Phillips, says Marshall, isn't a "rah-rah guy." Jackson points out that the coach likes to start off meetings with a joke, to put his players at ease. Phillips doesn't batter his players in film sessions, but he does hold them accountable.

"He's not going to dog-cuss you," says Jackson, "but he demands high play."

"He has a quiet demeanor, but he displays tenacity in the plays he calls," adds Ware. "Instead of talking a good game, he shows it."

Phillips's instant impact at every stop in his career has been undeniable. But so is the fact that over time his units have regressed. It's the double-edged sword of simplicity: He gets quick results, but that newness wears off and his players aren't always challenged enough mentally. "Some of the guys got bored with [his defense] after his second season," says one former player under Phillips who wishes to remain anonymous. That would explain, in part, why such a successful coach could be on his ninth stop with eight different teams, and why he didn't have a job in 2014.

But Phillips is back and on top of his game with these Broncos. Considering Peyton Manning's ticking clock and the collection of talent on Denver's defense (five starters are playing with expiring contracts), the coordinator's quick-burning flame might have met the perfect situation. And on Sunday night, even with all the attention on the quarterbacks, it might just be his defense that burns brightest. □

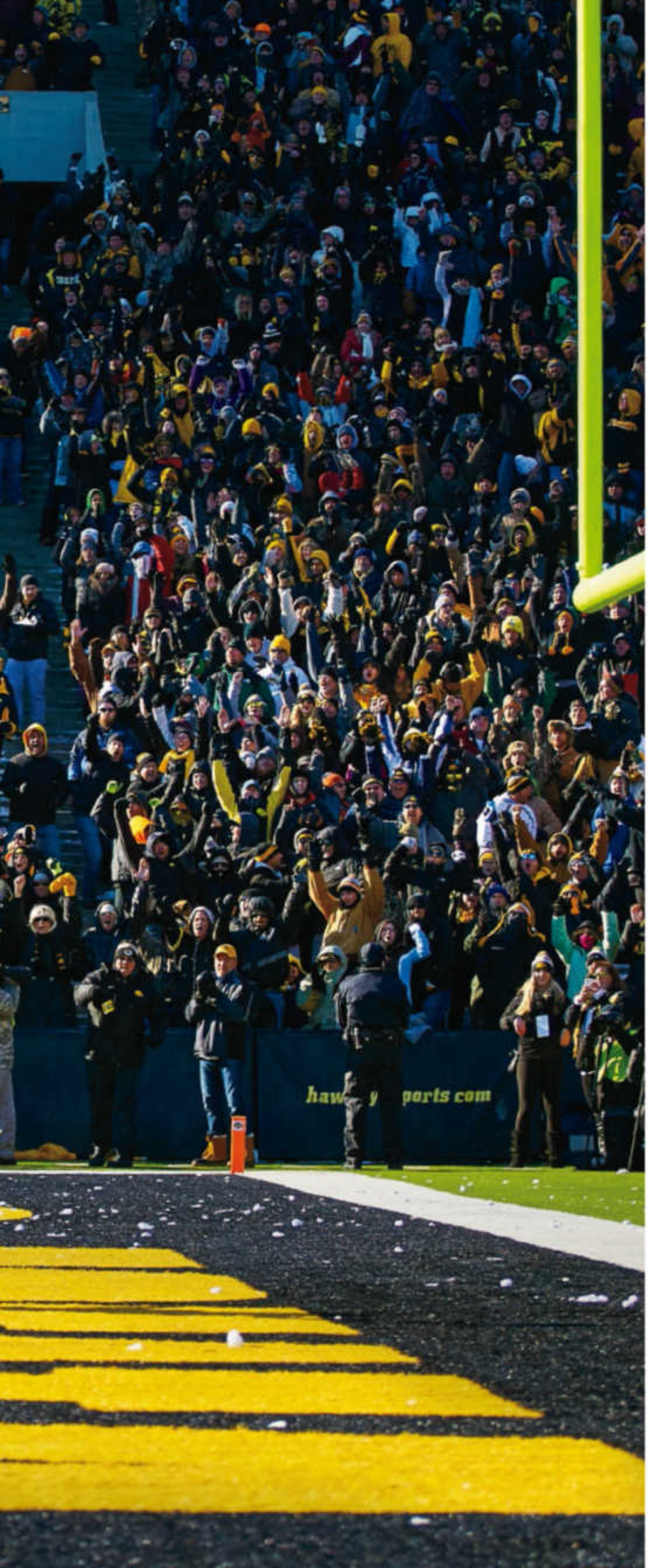
KNOCK, KNOCK

Who's there? The Hawkeyes, Tar Heels and Gators, and much to everyone's surprise—including possibly their own—all three teams are at the playoff's door. The committee may want to step back before that thing gets kicked in

BY ALBERT CHEN



Photograph by **Jeff Haynes** for Sports Illustrated



PARTY ZONE
Iowa junior tight end George Kittle hauled in a 35-yard TD in Saturday's win over Purdue, which clinched the Big Ten West title.

IT MAY NOT be the top of the Empire State Building or the waterway along the Bridge of Sighs, but the field at Kenan Memorial Stadium has at least become the most romantic setting in college football. This fall in particular, love is in the air at the 88-year-old redbrick structure nestled in North Carolina's campus, surrounded by towering pines. In early November the son of an assistant coach led his girlfriend onto a freshly painted field and proposed in front of empty seats. Two days later a sellout crowd produced a thunderous roar during a 66–31 drubbing of Duke, when one cheerleader on the sideline asked another to marry him. Then on Nov. 14, after the Tar Heels' 59–21 rout of Miami, Damien Washington, a reserve senior receiver, found his girlfriend, Chemaria Beatty, under one goalpost. As the jumbotron captured the moment for the packed stadium, Washington took a knee in front of the woman he'd met in choir two years earlier.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

"Yes!" Beatty, an elementary school teacher, screamed, and the cheers of the crowd put an exclamation point on a day in which North Carolina won its ninth straight game to cap a perfect 7–0 season at home. It would be tempting to call the proposal a fairy-tale ending for an up-and-down program at the end of a decidedly up season, but with these Tar Heels it's impossible to know when—or if—midnight will strike. Last weekend they improved to 10–1 after escaping with a 30–27 overtime win at Virginia Tech in coach Frank Beamer's last home game. A preseason pick to finish fifth in the ACC, North Carolina has emerged as something unimaginable: an honest-to-goodness national championship contender.

It has been a season of the unexpected in college football, of startling falls of the elite (Oregon, LSU and, most recently, Ohio State) and uprisings at strange places (Navy, Temple, Houston). The most dramatic twist has, fittingly, revealed itself at the denouement of the regular season, with the emergence of three upstarts—North Carolina, Iowa and Florida *(page 41)*—that have each clinched division titles, giving them a chance to claim one of the Power 5 conference

championships and, perhaps, a spot in the final four.

The most unlikely of the party crashers—the Tar Heels and the Hawkeyes—have spent so much of the season as outsiders that as recently as mid-October, neither was ranked in the AP top 15. The two programs share this too: Both were on the verge of unraveling after disastrous 2014 seasons, with their embattled coaches left to put them back together.

THE BEAUTY of Iowa football is that it has never relented, never given in to hyperspeed modernity or spread offenses, never wavered from its roots. It remains as conservative and, yes, as dull as ever. It is freezing weather and nondescript quarterbacks and immovable offensive lines and three yards and a cloud of dust. It is Hayden Fry, the steely Texan who won enough to become an icon in the state, and it is Kirk Ferentz, the only other man who has coached in Iowa City since 1979.

With his salt-and-pepper hair, perpetually miffed expression and shirt-tucked-into-baggy-khakis gym-teacher look, Ferentz is proudly staid, and after 17 years his teams can seem to have all the variety of corn fields. Even this year's players have remarked how little has changed as they watch highlights of past teams—Bob Sanders making interceptions, Nate Kaeding kicking game-winning field goals—as they loop at the practice facility. Like Ferentz himself, the Hawkeyes are never controversial and seldom noteworthy; they have had winning seasons in six of the past seven years, but their winning percentage during that stretch is an even 60.

Nothing would have presaged Iowa's run this season to 11–0, the only unbeaten team in the nation besides Clemson. Just 11 months ago, in fact, the program seemed to be on the cusp of a major shake-up. The Hawkeyes finished 7–6, but it was the way they lost the final two games—a 37–34 decision at home to Nebraska in overtime and a 45–28 humiliation at the hands of Tennessee in the TaxSlayer Bowl—that left the loyal and steadfast fans restless. There were rumors about groups of fans in hamlets across the state collectively deciding not to renew season tickets, and the program faced its largest exodus of supporters in a decade. (*The Des Moines Register* reported that the loss in revenues from the decline in season-ticket purchases was nearly $2 million.) "There was a temptation to do something rash, a belief that some big change was possibly needed," says athletics director Gary Barta. "I don't think there weren't a lot of people who wanted me fired and wanted Coach fired."

Both survived the storm; it didn't hurt that the 60-year-old coach is signed through 2020, at $4 million per season. Still, Ferentz went into the off-season open to reconsidering all aspects of the program. In a January press conference he elevated junior quarterback C.J. Beathard over two-year starter Jake Rudock. (Rudock transferred to Michigan three months later.) He held extensive meetings with players and staff. He and his coaches visited other schools, though he won't say which ones. "In terms of changes that we were going to make," Ferentz says, "everything was up for grabs."

So the coach moved his practice time to 8:00 a.m., hoping to maximize the players' performance by getting them on the field at their

MCELWAIN IS THE FIRST COACH TO WIN 10 GAMES IN HIS FIRST YEAR IN GAINESVILLE. **"DOUBLE DIGITS," HE SAID. "THAT MEANS OUR NEXT ONE I GET TO COUNT WITH TOES."**



CLOSE WON Back Kelvin Taylor (21) and the Gators looked sluggish against FAU, but wins against Florida State and the SEC West champ would send them to the semifinals.

CHIP LITHERLAND FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

most efficient hours. He also used GPS tracking and recovery-monitoring technology to guide further changes to the practice routine; from early Wednesday until kickoff three days later, the only work the team does is a brisk Friday-morning walk-through. The idea is to extend the players' recovery periods; Ferentz is constantly checking in with strength-and-conditioning coach Chris Doyle about the Hawkeyes' fatigue levels. "Instead of just saying to the players at kickoff, Hey, how are you feeling? the science is backing it up," says Ferentz.

There are subtle ways that this Iowa team is different on the field too. The offense is less predictable behind Beathard, a shrewd 6' 2", 209-pound dual-threat improviser, though the fundamentals remain the same: run first (three backs have at least 449 yards and seven touchdowns) and play solid defense (16th in total D, with 322.5 ypg). And the Hawkeyes may be loosening up in other ways. Before a 40–35 win over Minnesota at Kinnick Stadium two weeks ago they ran out of the tunnel in "blackout" attire—the first time anyone could recall such a radical departure in their uniforms. "We'd agreed to it long before the season, and leading up to the game, [the players] were afraid to bring it up to me; they thought for sure I would



FLORIDA STRAITS

The Gators have wildly overachieved. Now comes the hard part

THE LOOK IN his players' eyes during last Saturday's lackluster 20–14 overtime win over Florida Atlantic inspired Florida coach Jim McElwain to conjure a vivid image: "When you guys go to the seafood market, or if you go to the grocery store, and you see all those dead fish on ice? That's the energy they're playing with right now."

But just as quickly McElwain turned to more uplifting thoughts: His team has clinched the SEC East title, and he is the first coach to win 10 games in his first year at Gainesville. "Double digits," said McElwain, 53, who replaced Will Muschamp last December. "That means our next one I get to count with toes."

If the Gators were to beat Florida State at home on Saturday and then beat the SEC West champion (likely Alabama) in Atlanta, they would be 12–1 and a near shoo-in for the College Football Playoff. But this is the same team that over the past three weeks has beaten Vanderbilt, South Carolina and Florida Atlantic (combined record: 9–24) by a total of just 18 points. Defeating either the Seminoles or the Crimson Tide (combined record: 19–3) is far-fetched; the idea of beating them both seems downright insane.

Yet it would have seemed just as crazy in August to predict that a team with only one offensive lineman who had made an SEC start would play for the conference title. Florida's strength is a defense that ranks sixth in the nation in yards per play (4.3) and sixth in sacks (36). When they were beating better teams, like Ole Miss, the Gators also flashed an opportunistic offense that relied on the playmaking of freshman receiver Antonio Callaway, who averages 20.0 yards a catch. But in the five games since the one-year suspension of quarterback Will Grier, who tested positive for a performance-enhancing substance, sophomore Treon Harris has struggled, especially as injuries to the O-line mounted.

Still, the 4–8 Gators of 2013 or the 7–5 Gators of '14 found ways to lose; these Gators have found ways to win. This is the sort of success that Florida's players—most of whom were impressionable teens when Urban Meyer was winning national titles in Gainesville—expected when they signed. "You appreciate it a lot," senior guard Trip Thurman says. "With Coach Mac, it's a new era. He's got Florida back on top."

Not quite. Florida still needs a few improbable wins, but stranger things have happened. For instance, the 2015 Gators' winning 10 games in the first place. —*Andy Staples*

say no," says Ferentz. "I think I shocked everyone by not changing my mind. I'm just relieved it didn't jinx us."

This is a new Kirk Ferentz. New Kirk has, in fact, emerged as a meme, with T-shirts popping up at Kinnick—NEW KIRK! GOES FOR IT ON 4TH DOWN! and NEW KIRK! CALLS FAKE FIELD GOALS! "My wife still recognizes me," Ferentz deadpans. "This New Kirk thing, I've figured it out. It's really easy. All you have to do is run two fake kicks early in the year that don't work, which we did in the first two games. And then you go for it on fourth down and *win the game*, because we went for it on fourth down a bunch last year, and no one was saying New Kirk back then. They were saying Dumb Kirk."



SAYS FEDORA, "TO BE HONEST, IT WAS EYE-OPENING FOR ME, A KIND OF GUT CHECK, TO HAVE THE PLAYERS SAY, **WE DON'T FEEL THE TRUST WITH THE COACHING STAFF."**

THERE ARE no prevailing memes around Chapel Hill, and despite the Tar Heels' success, attendance at Kenan is actually down 9% from a year ago. But anyone inside the program knows that the culture has changed, a shift that began in the moments after a 40–21 loss to Rutgers in the Quick Lane Bowl last December. The game sealed coach Larry Fedora's first losing season (6–7) at North Carolina and left players speaking with emotion outside their locker room. "We've got some soul-searching to do," receiver Ryan Switzer told reporters. "A lot of guys need to really figure out whether they really want to be here or not."

The introspection began in January, when Fedora convened a players' meeting and encouraged them to air their grievances. They pointed fingers at one another but also aimed some at the coaches. "To be honest, it was eye-opening for me, a kind of gut check, to have the players say, We don't feel the trust with the coaching staff," says Fedora, 53, who arrived in Chapel Hill from Southern Miss in 2012 and went 8–4 and 7–6 in his first two seasons. "A lot of it stemmed from negativity, people blaming others, and I put that all on me as the head coach. So everything we did after that meeting was geared toward fixing that negative culture."

Each preseason Fedora gives his senior class a book to read and report on to the team, and this summer, to set a warmer and fuzzier tone, he chose *The Positive Dog*, a 100-page fable about one canine who helps another overcome his pessimism. Fedora also began referring to a 2007 University of Pennsylvania study showing that students' self-control can be a more reliable predictor of grades than their IQs—evidence that grit can be more important than ability. To further the team-building, Fedora brought in a special ops unit of former Marines to oversee a two-day boot camp.

Positive vibes, team chemistry and fables can take you only so far, of course. Fedora's biggest move was hiring former Auburn coach Gene Chizik to repair the defense, which ranked 120th a year ago. After two years of working as a TV and radio analyst in the SEC, Chizik dived into his new job, putting all his pent-up energy into 18-hour days as he immersed himself in ACC football and UNC's personnel. "The first meeting, he didn't come out with these general statements about how much better we were going to be," says senior linebacker Shakeel Rashad. "He had a specific plan. He was already citing red zone statistics and other specifics. The mes-

MICHAEL SHROYER/GETTY IMAGES





HAPPY HEELS
A second-half pick by corner Des Lawrence (left) against Tech once again showed how an improved D has lifted North Carolina to the top of the ACC Coastal.

ROBERT WILLETT/RALEIGH NEWS & OBSERVER/TNS/LANDOV

sage was pretty simple: We're not going to leave anything to chance."

While the Tar Heels' offense has been shredding defenses, averaging 40.9 points a game (10th in the nation), the defensive turnaround is one of the largest in college football. Last year Carolina's D allowed opposing teams to break the 40-point mark six times, was ranked 120th in yards per game (497.8) and finished 122nd in yards per play (6.5). The Tar Heels have cut total yards by more than 100 per game (384.1) and rank 40th in yards per play (5.1). As a result UNC is a complete team that has steamrollered through the ACC since a 17–14 loss against South Carolina in the season opener.

"That's my fault we not getting the respect. I'll fix that," senior quarterback Marquise Williams tweeted last Tuesday, referring to North Carolina's place outside the top 10 (No. 11 in the most recent AP poll). Williams was referring to his three-interception performance in the loss to the Gamecocks. But last Saturday in Blacksburg, Williams rushed for 74 yards and passed for 205 and two touchdowns, including a gorgeous five-yard back-shoulder throw to senior receiver Quinshad Davis to seal the win.

In the Tar Heels' locker room after the game, an ACC official brought in the Coastal Division trophy and presented it to Fedora, who was grasping for words. "Man, I don't know what to say," the coach said. After a couple beats of silence, someone yelled, "We got grit!" and the yelping and hollering continued.

IT'S ACADEMIC," Kirk Ferentz explains. "We have to win out. If we lose one game, we'll probably drop to 20th. But the good news is that if we win our next game and the championship game, it would be hard to deny any major-conference team that could do that."

With a number of contenders still slotted to face each other this weekend and during conference championship week, the playoff scenarios remain dizzying. Ferentz is right to believe that Iowa's path to the playoff is as straight as the 50-yard line: win at Nebraska on Friday, then prevail in the Big Ten championship game in Indianapolis, likely against Michigan State. The Tar Heels, meanwhile, have a shot, but even with two victories, they'll need some help. They have a date at N.C. State on Saturday, before the ACC championship in Charlotte, where they will be substantial underdogs against No. 1 Clemson. A win over the undefeated Tigers would spark broad support, but North Carolina would also have to leap a slew of one-loss teams, including, for the moment, blue bloods Notre Dame, Oklahoma and Ohio State.

Fedora is not the type to go on national radio and make the case to the Finebaum Universe that his Heels should be one of The Four. "That was never our goal," Fedora says of reaching the playoff. From the start of the season he has begun his team meetings with the same mantra: "Coastal champs, state champs." One day after clinching the Coastal title, Fedora planned to stay with his mantra, but if his team beats the Wolfpack? If the fairy tale continues into December and North Carolina takes down Clemson?

"Well," the coach says. "Then maybe I would have to rethink things."

Soon enough, the college football world may have to rethink everything. The party crashers are coming, and they're ready to turn a tumultuous, illogical season into one of sheer madness. □


DOUBLE
VISION
DETROIT



WHEN IS IT A GOOD IDEA TO PLAY ONE BIG MAN ALL ALONE IN THE MIDDLE? WHEN THAT BIG MAN IS **ANDRE DRUMMOND**, WHO IS RACKING UP DOUBLE DOUBLES (INCLUDING MANY OF THE GAUDY, 20-AND-20 ILK) AT A HISTORIC PACE FOR THE IMPROVING PISTONS

BY LEE JENKINS / **Photographs** by John W. McDonough for Sports Illustrated

IN MID-SEPTEMBER 2007, two weeks before training camp, members of the Magic gathered at the team's practice facility for a pickup game that was both typical and transformative. Participants included center Dwight Howard, 22 years old and coming off his first All-Star selection, and power forward Tony Battie. A 6' 11" journeyman, Battie had finally discovered a home in Orlando's low post, flanking Howard for the better part of three years. The Magic hired a new coach in the summer of '07, Stan Van Gundy, and acquired a new wing, Rashard Lewis. But the hulking front line remained intact.

Battie and Howard formed a potent partnership, but they split up during the pickup game, since Battie was the rare player capable of outwrestling the overgrown prodigy. At one point Howard caught the ball on the block and backed Battie down. Battie raised his left forearm and planted it into Howard's midsection. He felt a twinge in his left shoulder. Two days later he couldn't lift the arm at all. An MRI revealed that Battie had torn his left rotator cuff and would miss six to eight months.

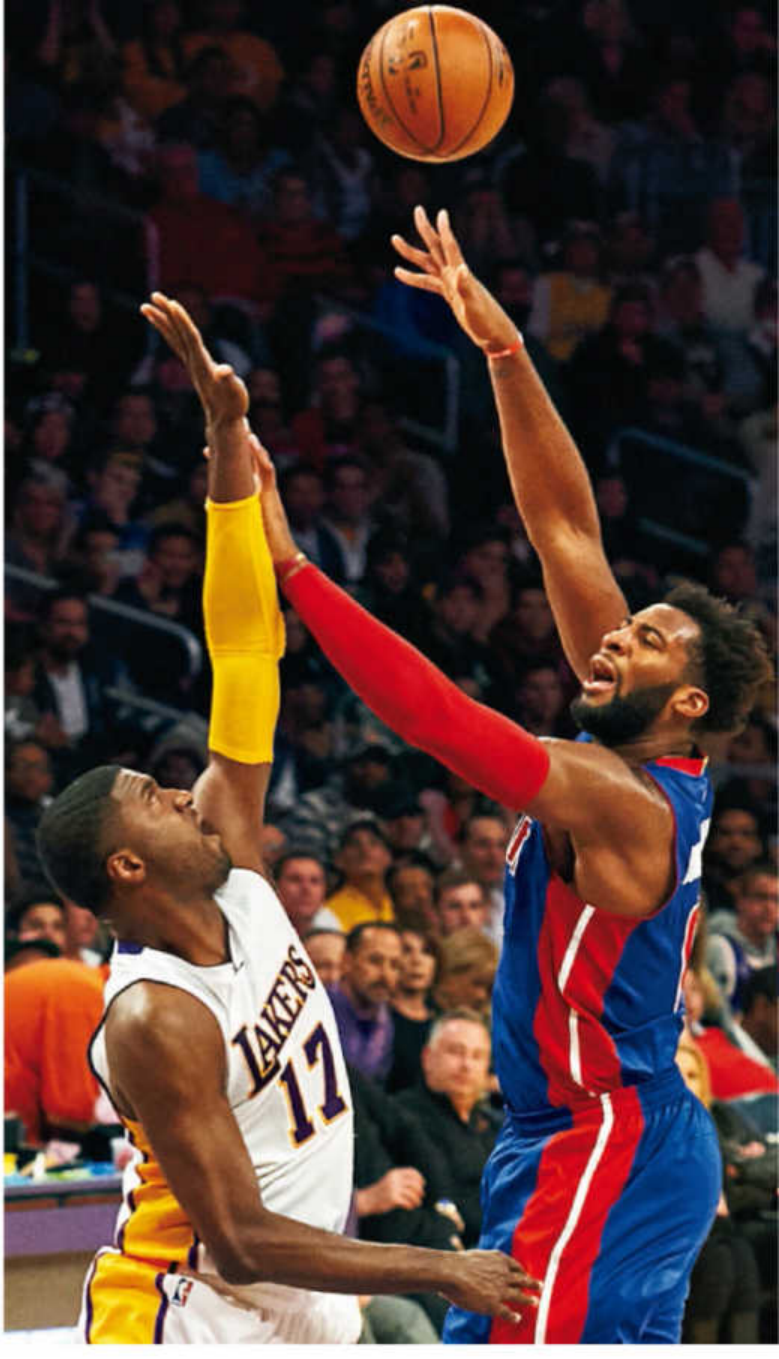
Forced to reimagine the lineup, Van Gundy abandoned the idea of a traditional power forward. He deployed Lewis and Hedo Turkoglu as his starting forwards, even though both were far more comfortable on the perimeter than in the paint. The Magic, with four sharpshooters orbiting Howard, won 16 of their first 20 games. A year later they reached the Finals. Superman was all the rage, and so was the four-out, one-in system, a model of modern basketball. "It was really an accident," Van Gundy says. Battie rehabbed his shoulder, started three games in '08–09 and was shipped to the Nets.

By stationing so many marksmen around the arc, Orlando drew defenders out, opening space for Howard to dive or post or kick. Mike D'Antoni had already applied some of the same principles in Phoenix, exploiting newfound crevices with Steve Nash–Amar'e Stoudemire pick-and-rolls, but the go-go Suns never had an eraser on defense like Howard. It didn't matter if Lewis and Turkoglu were bullied inside: Howard lay in wait, denying power forwards at the rim and dominating them on the glass.

A lot of teams across today's NBA run four-out, one-in. But how many human beings walk the Earth—let alone stalk the key—who stand nearly 7 feet tall, weigh nearly 280 pounds, run like guards, catch like shortstops, reach as high as Yao Ming and jump substantially higher? And of those, how many are willing to set cement-wall screens every 30 seconds, then barrel to the hoop and retrieve lobs at the square? Are there 10? Are there five? "Less," says Malik Allen, a forward on the 2010–11 Magic.

A coach is lucky to happen upon one in his career. Stan Van Gundy is working on No. 2.

DEPEND ON DRE
In his first 11 games, the 22-year-old Drummond failed to get 15 boards just once, and four times scored 20 or more.



ANDRE DRUMMOND is hiding. He sits in the lobby of the JW Marriott in downtown Los Angeles, Pistons hoodie pulled over his head, wearing black sunglasses, silver headphones and a thick headband. He speaks softly, barely above a whisper, and his teeth are obscured by braces. Drummond was born 22 years ago—checking in at 12 pounds, six ounces—and he spent much of his childhood in various forms of disguise. He was 6' 7" when he entered high school, but he walked with a hunch to look more like his peers, who were wary of his size. "They didn't want to hang out with me because I was so big," Drummond says. "They sometimes snuck into class late, and they worried I'd get them caught."

When UConn was courting Drummond, who by then had grown to 6' 10", coach Jim Calhoun asked why he played basketball. He had put the same question to countless recruits, from Ray Allen to Rip Hamilton, most of whom proclaimed they were chasing greatness. Drummond replied, "It's a great way to make friends and be part of something." Drummond, the most decorated prospect from Connecticut since Marcus Camby emerged from Hartford 22 years ago, was a different kind of blue-chipper. He served as a resident adviser at his prep school, consoling homesick freshmen, and when the team held a basketball camp in the summer, he requested to be a camper rather than a counselor. He walked on at UConn because the team was out of scholarships when he signed, which meant he couldn't live in the athletes' dorm, instead spending his lone year in Storrs with regular students on the other side of campus. When he interviewed with NBA front offices before the 2012 draft, he asked Trail Blazers owner and Microsoft cofounder Paul Allen about software programs, mentioning that he enjoyed writing HTML code.

Detroit selected Drummond with the ninth pick, and he moved into a house in suburban Rochester Hills with his mother, Christine Cameron, who chauffeured him to practice because he did not have a driver's license. Drummond's innocence endeared him to the organization. He would stroll into the office of Joe Dumars, then the president of basketball operations, and chat for three hours. He would sign autographs in the concourse on game nights when he was injured. He would tweet when he was headed to Somerset mall until he realized why he kept getting mobbed there. The Pistons were a dysfunctional franchise, but Drummond seemed almost immune to the turmoil. "I know Detroit has been a real messed-up place," Drummond recalls telling Dumars. "How can I help?"

His season invariably ended in April, which allowed him to take classes at UConn in May,and sneak in workouts at his hometown Middlesex YMCA. This summer, wide-eyed 17-year-old Railey Barett was working the front desk at the Y when Drummond strolled in and asked if he wanted to play 21. "Treat me like I'm somebody else," Drummond said. He is still eager to blend, a pursuit that has become impossible now that he is at the center of the four-out, one-in.

Since Van Gundy took over as coach and president of the team 18 months ago, reportedly spurning the Warriors, he has cleared room for Drummond the way he did for Howard. The Pistons waived power forward Josh Smith, even though two years and $26 million remained on his contract. They let center Greg Monroe bolt for Milwaukee, even though he averaged a double double. They bet everything on a 6' 11", 279-pound man-child, surrounding Drummond with a promising pick-and-roll partner (point guard Reggie Jackson) and three supersized snipers (Marcus Morris, Ersan Ilyasova and Anthony Tolliver). "They might not be as talented as they were [with Monroe and Smith]," an opposing coach says, "but the pieces finally fit, and they're featuring the right guy."

Forget Howard. Lakers coach Byron Scott compared Drummond with "a more athletic Moses Malone" after he put up 29 points and 27 rebounds against the Blazers, 25 points and 29 rebounds against the Pacers and 20 points



GOING OVER BIG
On back-to-back nights in L.A., Drummond totaled 35 points and 36 boards against Roy Hibbert (left) and DeAndre Jordan.

and 20 rebounds against the Bulls in a four-game stretch. The season is less than a month old, and Drummond has already captured Eastern Conference player of the week honors twice. He has only once left an arena without a double double. He leads the league in second-chance points, points in the paint and rebounding, with an average of 17.8 through Sunday. "He walks onto the court, and he's got 15 and 15," says Smith, now with the Clippers. Detroit, which hasn't reached the playoffs since 2009, is 7–6 and beat the vaunted Cavaliers on Nov. 17 behind 25 and 18 from Drummond.

The four-out, one-in has been a boon for him. Drummond extols the benefits of the system but does not recall its origin, and for good reason. In late 2007, he was undergoing a metamorphosis of his own.

DRUMMOND GREW UP in Middletown, a city of 47,000 on the western bank of the Connecticut River, where everybody seemed to know his name. "He was big and tall and looked exactly like what a basketball player is supposed to look like," says Levi Gillespie, the coach at Capital Preparatory Magnet School in nearby Hartford. "People heard about him and went to see him. But when he didn't perform the way they expected, they became disappointed. A lot of those people were mean to him—mean to his face." Drummond and others remember the jeers at the Middlesex Y from players and parents of players who believed his prodigious gifts were being squandered. *You're tall for nothing. . . . You should pick another sport. . . . You can't walk and chew gum.*

He didn't disagree. "It was hard to watch me play," Drummond says. "I was all over the place, tripping over myself, falling on the court, throwing up air balls." He was cut from his middle school team in seventh grade and cried on the bus ride home. "Back then, everybody was telling me, 'You're terrible, you suck, you should be so much better than you are.' It took a toll. I went through a period where it was really depressing. I felt like I couldn't do anything right." Before his freshman year at Capital Prep, he asked his mother how he could change his fortunes. Cameron, a Jamaican immigrant who raised two children on her own as a nurse at Middlesex Hospital, did not know much about basketball. She referred to her son's games as "comedy hour" because of his many gaffes. But she sensed he would grow into his body. She sent him back to the Y.

"I played pickup there from dawn to dusk, damn near 50 games a day, against whoever came in that gym," Drummond says. "I closed up with the janitors." When the competition dried up, he worked with a cousin named Victor Anderson, who taught him to dunk. "Be a beast!" Anderson implored, but Drummond struggled to see himself that way. At Capital Prep, he begged Gillespie for opportunities to play point guard, and sometimes the coach humored him, marveling at his tight handle and no-look passes. But Drummond wasn't going to make a living running the break. "You're a big person," Gillespie said. "You have to get comfortable in your own skin." Drummond remained awkward but showed glimpses of otherworldly athleticism. He dunked while hitting his head on the backboard. He rebounded without bothering to box out. He blocked shots with his left hand as well as his right.

ONE COACH SAYS OF THE DRUMMOND-CENTRIC PISTONS, **"THE PIECES FINALLY FIT,** AND THEY'RE FEATURING THE RIGHT GUY."

As a junior Drummond transferred to St. Thomas More in Oakdale, Connecticut's answer to Oak Hill Academy, where at 16 he became the youngest student ever to play for legendary coach Jere Quinn—and the largest ever to top the 1-2-2 press. "Physically, you've won the lottery," Quinn told Drummond. "You have all the numbers. You just can't screw them up." So many big men toss their golden ticket in the trash, from Eddy Curry to Michael Olowokandi, and those are only the most famous examples. They often play because they can. The best play because they want to.

When Drummond declared for the draft after his freshman season, Quinn regaled scouts with stories about his five-star center volunteering as an assistant coach for the freshman team so he could spend more time in the gym. But evaluators were skeptical. They saw another potentially flaky giant who attended two high schools, settled on a college three days before the beginning of the fall semester and occasionally vanished once he arrived. Drummond scored 20 points against West Virginia, one against Arkansas; 18 at Georgetown, none at Louis-



ville. The Huskies, coming off a national championship, were one-and-done in the NCAA tournament. Several general managers picking early in the 2012 draft confused Drummond's inconsistency for indifference. "We had concerns about work ethic," one says, "and competitive spirit."

Drummond held his mother's hand under a table at Prudential Center in Newark as commissioner David Stern announced the names. "First pick, I knew it was Anthony Davis to New Orleans," Drummond says. "Second pick, Charlotte traded Corey Maggette for Ben Gordon, so they needed a small forward. Michael Kidd-Gilchrist. Third pick, Washington, Bradley Beal. Fourth pick, Cleveland. I had a great workout there. I thought they liked me. They took Dion Waiters. Fifth pick, Sacramento, I had a weird workout there. I got poked in my eye and lost my contact. They took Thomas Robinson. No. 6 comes up. I thought Portland liked me as well. They went with Damian Lillard. No. 7 rolls around. Golden State said, 'If you're on the board, we might take you.' Harrison Barnes. Then it's No. 8, and the guy with the Raptors hat walks over. I'm thinking, *I'm going to Toronto*. Terrence Ross."

Drummond recounts the entire stomach-churning sequence with much detail but no bitterness. "I broke down when Detroit called," he says, "because I was so happy."

BY THE NUMBERS

4.2
Rebounds per game by which Drummond led Dwight Howard at week's end; no player has held such a margin in boards since 1994–95.

30
Years since a player (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) last had 150 points and 150 rebounds in his first eight games, as Drummond did.

38.6
Drummond's defensive rebound percentage through 13 games. The best for a full season is 38.0, by Reggie Evans in 2012–13.

GEORGE DAVID accompanied Drummond to the 2013 All-Star weekend in Houston. Drummond had been selected to play in the Rising Stars Challenge, and even though he was injured, he wanted to attend. David, then the Pistons' assistant GM, caught Drummond gazing longingly at the posters of All-Stars in the airport and at the hotel. When they returned to Detroit, David asked Drummond for his takeaway. "I don't know if I want to go back," Drummond said, "unless I'm playing on Sunday."

If David wasn't already convinced that the Pistons made the right pick, he was then. He had spent a week scouting Drummond at UConn and saw what others may have missed: the way he smiled when he practiced and the way he stayed after for extra work instead of sprinting to the locker room. The Huskies faltered for many reasons. Drummond did not fix the problems, but he did not cause them either. "He conforms to the group," says former UConn assistant Patrick Sellers, which is why he was so excited when Van Gundy came to Detroit, telling Drummond, "This is going to be the best thing for you."

The Pistons brought Drummond along slowly, first as a backup to Jason Maxiell, then a sidekick to Monroe. He could be brilliant one moment, as when he stripped Heat guard Dwyane Wade twice in 43 seconds, and bumbling the next. He spent all of last summer with Malik Allen, adjusting to his new responsibilities. "He used to just screen-and-roll, screen-and-roll, and you could throw that thing to the moon because he'd go get it," Allen says. "But when the lob wasn't there, they tossed it into Greg, and Dre became kind of an afterthought."

Without Monroe, Drummond still starts virtually every possession with a high screen-and-roll, sucking in the defense. But if the Pistons can't score off that initial action, he seals his man and raises his hand. Drummond admires elaborate back-to-the-basket moves—he studies the low-post stylings of Hornets center Al Jefferson and pesters Big Al about training with him—but the Pistons encourage him to simplify. While the ground-bound Jefferson requires a diverse repertoire, the spring-loaded Drummond can tally 20 points with nothing but dunks, putbacks and jump hooks. He can grab 20 rebounds with nary a box-out. "It's like a sensor goes off inside of me," Drummond explains. "I just go get the ball."

Van Gundy harps at Drummond to show such gusto away from the glass. After a practice in L.A., at USC's Galen Center, Van Gundy sits next to Drummond and reviews clips of every screen he set in a loss to the Kings. Van Gundy wants Drummond to see how Detroit surged when he rolled hard and lagged when he let up. Watching coach and player, in the early stages of a beautiful basketball marriage, it is hard to imagine that they'll ever split. But the same might have been said about Howard and Van Gundy back in '07, and their divorce played out in the ugliest way: at a press conference in Or-

BRINGING BACK THE MAGIC

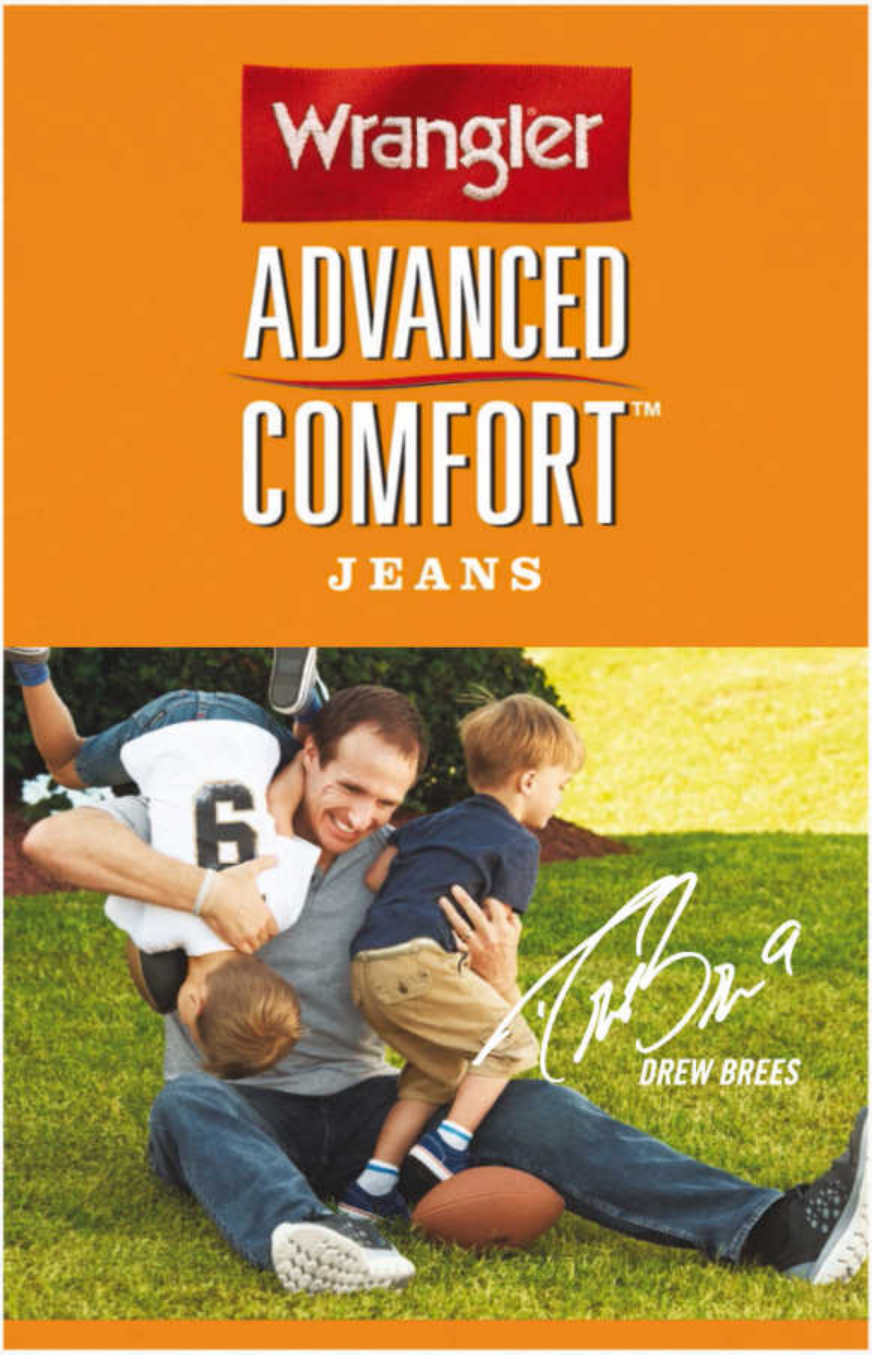
Van Gundy has once again built an attack around four snipers and a young center—and this one is up for the challenge.

lando, five years later, when Van Gundy told reporters that Howard was lobbying for his ouster. In a month Van Gundy was fired, and four months after that Howard was traded to the Lakers. He hasn't been the same since.

Staffers who followed Van Gundy from Orlando to Detroit detect subtle changes in his hard-driving ways—practices are shorter, for instance—but he will never babysit stars. "All coaches want the same things," says a former Magic player. "The difference is, Stan tells you what they are. He's transparent. And not everybody likes hearing it." Drummond has responded, overhauling his pregame routine to build energy and focus. He hits up sushi restaurants before every tip-off, in part so he can eat light (usually crab or shrimp), then catches a cab to the arena, often arriving before the bus. He plops down at his locker and meditates.

Drummond will be a restricted free agent next summer, which means the Pistons will re-sign him to a maximum contract or match whatever offer another team presents. He has graduated from project to pillar, inviting Stanley Johnson to live with him when the rookie's mother died of breast cancer in August, and gathering players in the Sleep Train Arena locker room when they fell to the Kings. "We can't let this take us away from who we are," he preached. But he is still the same age as college seniors. He shoots 42.5% from the free throw line. He gets three calls from his mom during a 45-minute interview. He smiles at the name flashing on the screen.

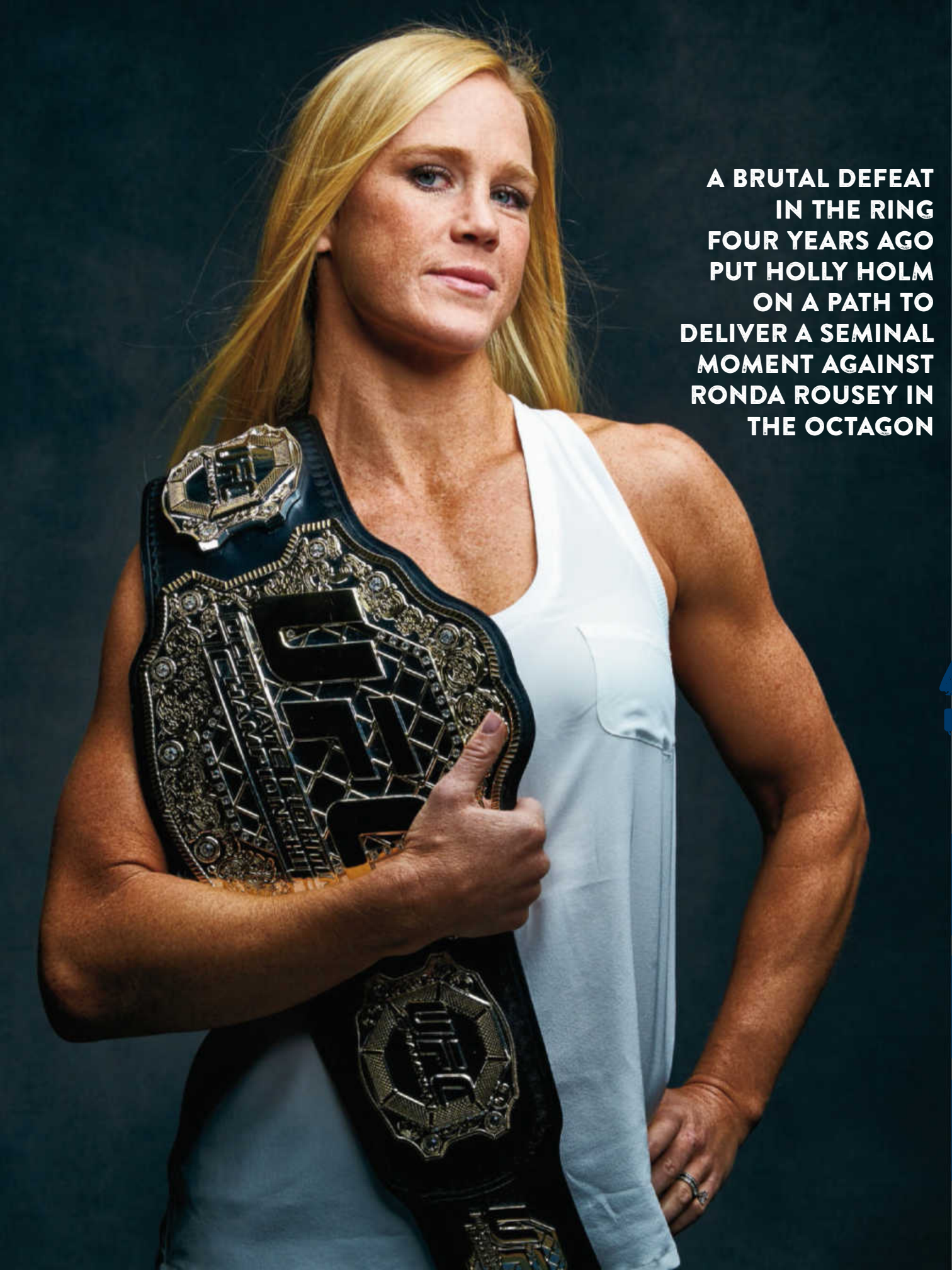
"She keeps me grounded," he says, "because there are so many distractions in this game, so many things going on off that court. It's stressful." He is talking about money, fame, temptation. He is reminded that it's only beginning. "I know," he says, with a nod and a laugh. Where he's headed there are no disguises. □



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A BRUTAL DEFEAT IN THE RING FOUR YEARS AGO PUT HOLLY HOLM ON A PATH TO DELIVER A SEMINAL MOMENT AGAINST RONDA ROUSEY IN THE OCTAGON



BY L. JON WERTHEIM

Photograph by
Victoria Will for Sports Illustrated

AIN'T THAT A KICK IN THE HEAD?

THOSE PUNCHES launched by Holly Holm's fists, the ones that collided with Ronda Rousey's nose, mouth and cheeks? That snapping roundhouse kick to the head—you've most likely seen it by now—that caught Rousey under her ear, divorcing her from consciousness and leaving her aura of invincibility as badly punctured as her face? Those blows resembled love taps compared with the violence that Holm endured on a December night in 2011.

Holm was a polished boxing champ at the time, a lithe welterweight with three dozen pro fights that included wins over Mia St. John and Christy Martin. But on that night she stood (barely) in the ring of New Mexico's Route 66 Casino and took a beating. Her opponent, a French fighter named Anne Sophie Mathis, reared back and fired away, turning Holm's face into a Cubist smear. At one point Holm needed the referee's assistance to untangle herself from the ropes. The fight, mercifully stopped in the seventh round, marked a low point in her life, to say nothing of her fighting career. While no one knew it at the time, it would also mark a major moment in mixed martial arts.

After the fight, Holm held two opposing ideas in her mind. She was already gravitating away from boxing and toward MMA, the versatile and voguish combat sport that was steadily elbowing (and kneeing and choking) boxing out of the mainstream. The money and glory and competition were spilling to MMA; Holm reckoned she might as well follow. Plus, her hometown, Albuquerque, was becoming ground zero for the sport, as fighters from all over the world converged there to train with Greg Jackson and Mike Winklejohn.

At the same time, Holm wanted a rematch against Mathis. "It's like you want to undo history," she says. "If I don't at least try, I'll regret it the rest of my life." Anyone who didn't agree with her, who thought she shouldn't risk more damage, was told to stay away. "Holly wanted no negativity in her camp," recalls Julie Kedzie, one of Holm's Albuquerque sparring partners. "Don't think I can do it? I can't have you around."

The rematch was held in the summer of 2012 in the same casino. Holm made adjustments and beat Mathis by a decision. Holm learned that she could recover from a beating. And that fighters are

rewarded for suppressing instincts to brawl and for sticking to their game plans. And that revenge can be a powerful motivator.

This was nothing new for her. Holm is a self-described tomboy. As the younger sister of two boys, Brian and Weston, Holly by necessity learned to hold her own. Each season brought a new sport at which she could excel. But combat sports nourished her most. "I'm competitive by nature, and one thing about fighting, it is the most physical and competitive sport," she says. "It's you against them. I love that."

As a teenage boxer and kickboxer, she won fights early and often. Blonde, muscled and heterosexual, she was an easy sell for promoters. But she bristled at self-promotion. She rejected the nickname Hottie Holly in favor of . . . nothing. She also lacked a hard-scrabble backstory. Her father, Roger, is a preacher at Albuquerque's Edgewood Church of Christ in the East Mountains. Her mom, Tammy, who also lives in Albuquerque, is a massage therapist. In 2012, Holly married Jeff Kirkpatrick, who runs a New Mexico roofing business. She never fought to work off anger.

Her transition to MMA was fast. Her ascent was faster. At 135 pounds she won various fights for various promotions (i.e., leagues) for as little as $500 apiece, mostly by bringing her striking to bear. In the summer of 2014 she got the MMA equivalent of a call-up to the big leagues: The UFC offered her a five-fight deal. Holm was signed in part because of her record and her pedigree, but also because there was heavy demand. The UFC had finally created a women's division, mostly to accommodate Rousey, whose skills and popularity could no longer go ignored. Soon the problem became finding capable opponents for the star.

In Holm's first two UFC fights her nerves jellied and she "scratched out" a pair of decisions, as MMA fighters say. When she was tapped in August to oppose Rousey in UFC 193, the choice was considered a mild surprise, given Holm's inexperience. Rousey had become an A-lister, her fights spanning less time than most Vines. Holm, an 18-to-1 underdog, was unfazed. "Odds are just something people write on paper," she said. Besides, she was confident that Rousey couldn't hurt her any worse than Anne Sophie Mathis had.

In the buildup to the fight Holm cried daily. "So much was going into it; I loved it and I hated it," she says. "Every day had its own emotion." While she concealed her anxiety, Rousey did not conceal hers. After a testy weigh-in, Rousey took to Instagram and declared in part: "Fake ass cheap shotting fake respect fake humility b---- . . . 'preacher's daughter' my ass." Even accounting for prefight goose-the-pay-per-view hype, that was weirdly hostile. As Holm told her camp, "Her head's in a different place than normal."



THE UFC HAS A NEW CHAMP WHO'S THE OPPOSITE OF THE OLD CHAMP. ROUSEY GORGED ON CELEBRITY. HOLM LISTS HER HOBBIES AS SEWING AND BAKING.

DECKED BY HOLLY
Holm's masterly game plan included a flurry of lefthanded jabs that set Rousey up for the final blow.

On fight night Rousey's head literally was not in the right place, perched as it was in front of Holm's jabs. Rousey has an unrivaled ground game, but her stand-up game revealed gaping holes. Sticking to a masterly plan, Holm squeezed off jabs and slickly moved away. Then the same feet that moved with such agility became weapons. We can argue about whether it sealed "the greatest upset in the history of MMA," but let's agree here: Holm's knockout kick to the champ's head was a seminal moment in the sport's history.

The UFC has a new champ who's the opposite of the old champ. Rousey gorged on celebrity: movie roles, WWE cameos, media appearances. Holm lists her hobbies as sewing and baking. If Rousey was irrepressible, a bottomless well of candor, her successor chooses her words carefully and acts like, well, the self-possessed 34-year-old adult she is.

Last week, just a few days after her triumph, Holm was already thinking about her inevitable rematch with Rousey, most likely in the summer of 2016. Holm knows from experience the galvanizing effect of losing. "If I had the best night of my life," she says, "that means she had the worst night of hers."

Holm's reverie has been interrupted by stardom. Back in Albuquerque, the city council quickly declared November to be Holly Holm month. The UFC sent its new star on a media tour. Holm would rather have been back in the gym. How is she handling this displacement from her comfort zone? "Living a comfortable life," she says, "doesn't usually result in something big." □

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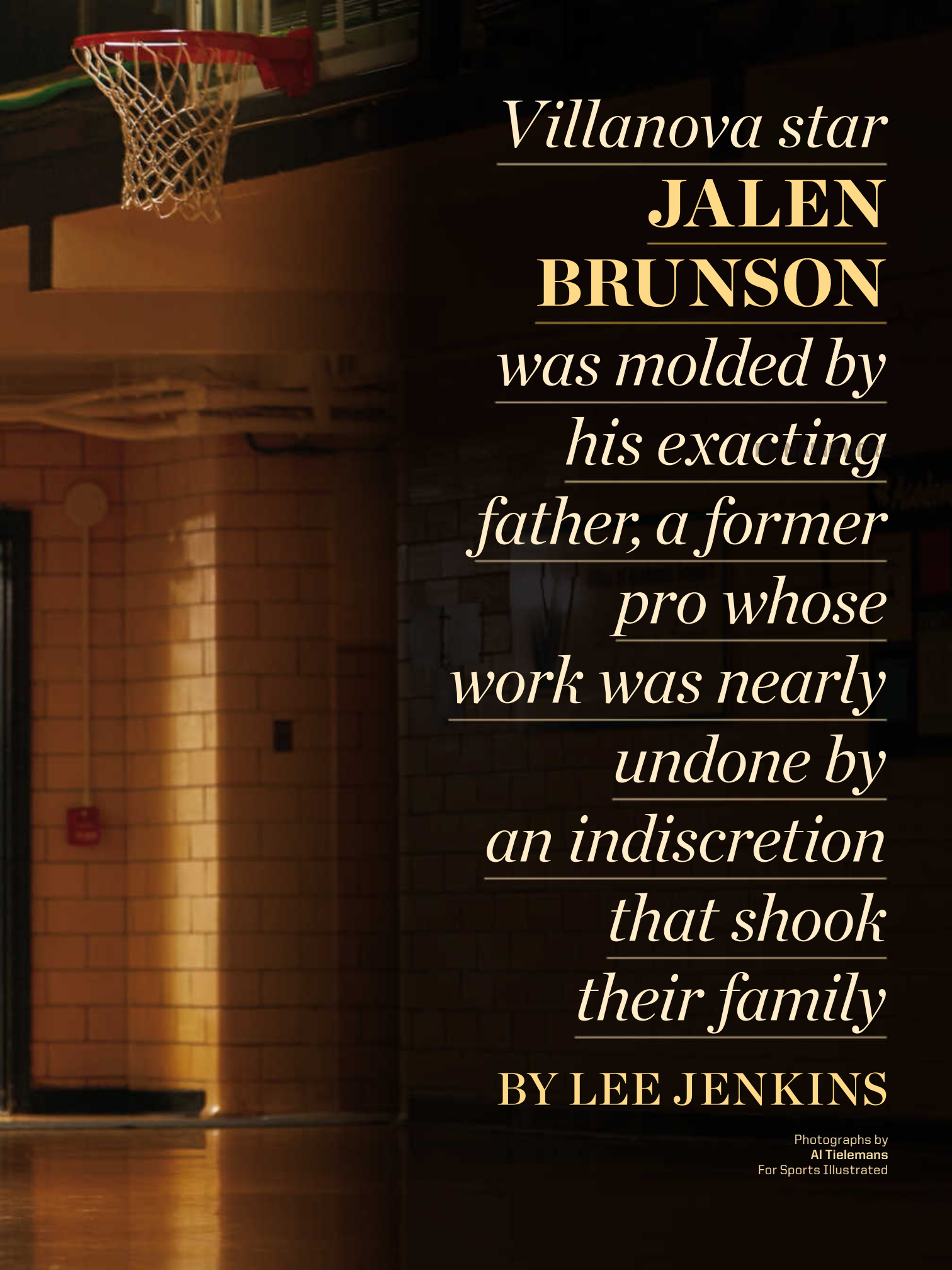
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EVER-PRESENT
Rick (in doorway) has been unable to get a college or pro coaching job, but he still keeps a close eye on the game of his prized pupil.



Villanova star **JALEN BRUNSON** *was molded by his exacting father, a former pro whose work was nearly undone by an indiscretion that shook their family*

BY LEE JENKINS

Photographs by
Al Tielemans
For Sports Illustrated

THE WHITE BMW 750 sedan pulled out of the Wachovia Center and headed toward the Walt Whitman Bridge, leaving the lights of downtown Philadelphia behind. It was Oct. 25, 2006, and the 76ers had just beaten the New Jersey Nets in their last exhibition game. After the final horn 10-year-old Jalen Brunson retreated to the Philly locker room while his father, reserve point guard Rick Brunson, joined Sixers general manager Billy King in a back office. Later Jalen thought it strange when his dad left the arena without saying goodbye to anybody, trudging silently to the car, but the boy wasn't concerned. The regular season started in a week, and for the first time all of the Brunsons would spend it in one city. On the drive home to Cherry Hill, N.J., Jalen talked excitedly about opening night. Finally Rick interrupted the dream. "Son," he said, "I'm not going to play for the Sixers. I got cut again."

It was the eighth time. Or the ninth. Rick had lost track. He had played for the Magic, Knicks, Blazers, Heat, Celtics, Bulls, Raptors, Clippers, SuperSonics, Rockets, Blazers again, Knicks again, Bulls again, Clippers again. He had spent nine seasons in the NBA, all on one-year make-good contracts, counting the days until Jan. 10, when those tenuous deals became guaranteed.

Jalen was disappointed, but he tried to remain upbeat. His father would catch on somewhere else. He always did.

"No," Rick said. "This is it. I'm done."

The 76ers had been the first team to cut him, in favor of Elmer Bennett before the 1995–96 season, and they'd be the last. At least they didn't ask his wife to deliver the news, as the Knicks once did when it was she who picked up the phone in their White Plains, N.Y., hotel room. Rick glanced at his son in the passenger's seat. The boy looked like he was about to cry.

Jalen used to sit courtside in his stroller while Rick worked out. He rode his bike while Rick ran on a nearby track. He wore suits to games, like his dad, even when the games were on plastic hoops in his grandparents' kitchen. He cut the sleeves off his T-shirts, because that's what the pros did, and he carried toys in a roller bag, as if he were forever en route to a charter. He shot imaginary jumpers at Madison Square Garden, impersonating Allan Houston's jab step. When he rocked a Michael Jordan jersey at a Wizards game, Jordan asked, "Would you like me to sign that?"



Rick could be brutal, but he wasn't raising a gunner. Jalen learned to dish.

"No," Jalen replied, backing away. "You'll mess it up."

As Jalen grew older, friends offered primo tickets, but he turned them down, explaining that he didn't like sitting in the stands. He preferred to be with the towel boys. Basketball was not entertainment. It was work.

Rick gave Jalen after-school chores: Sink 100 layups righthanded, 100 lefthanded, dribble two balls around the block, then do 30 minutes of box jumps. Rick lowered the rim on the backyard basket to eight feet and banned Jalen from attempting three-pointers, for fear he'd develop poor mechanics. But the kid still found his shots. Once, Rick returned to Cherry Hill during All-Star Weekend and watched Jalen chuck his way through a pickup game. Horrified, Rick walked onto the floor and chewed out his son in the huddle. "None of these people came here to watch you play by yourself," he hissed. "Pass the ball or get out of the gym." Jalen sobbed. Parents muttered: *What a nut*. Rick could be brutal, but he wasn't going to raise a gunner. Jalen learned to dish.

Retired athletes often take years to discover a second act. Rick found his that night in 2006 before he crossed the Delaware River into South Jersey. "I don't want you to live how I lived," he told Jalen, who blinked back tears. "If you really want to be a ballplayer, listen to what I tell you, and you will take a different route."



VILLANOVA HAS finished practice on a Monday evening in mid-October, and the only people still on the court at the Davis Center are Jalen Brunson and Jay Wright. Jalen, the most vaunted freshman point guard in college basketball, and Wright, the Wildcats' decorated head coach, are discussing whether to split the defense in transition or skip the ball to the weak side. Jalen, 19, became the country's top point guard recruit and the latest Chicagoland phenom largely because of his ability to attack the rim. Wright, who has spent 14 years deconstructing Big East defenses, wants him to drive and kick. Jalen nods.

He is a precocious 6' 2", 199-pound playmaker who grew up with a Steve Nash Fathead on his wall, studied YouTube clips of Steph Curry and Chris Paul, and interviewed Kyle Lowry and Deron Williams while deciding between Villanova and Illinois, their respective alma maters. Unlike many modern floor generals, Brunson is not a one-man fast break. He manipulates screens, exploits angles and probes gaps, all with the dead-eyed expression of an underground fighter. "It's a stoic, nasty look," Wright says. "He never, ever smiles. He plays with a scowl that's inspiring to teammates but puts fear in opponents and hatred in fans."

Wright suggests that Jalen's unyielding approach was inherited, passed down from an NBA father who got cut eight times—or was it nine? Wright remembers coaching at Hofstra in 1998 and staying up late one night to watch the Blazers play the Lakers. Rick scored 19 points for Portland. Early the next morning, when Wright ambled into the Hofstra gym, Rick was there shooting. Wright did a double take. Rick, who lived on Long Island then, had hopped the red-eye from LAX for the All-Star break and driven straight to campus. Jalen describes the sight of his dad after those workouts, cutoffs drenched with the desperation of a man churning for one more contract. Jalen is indeed a product of the many trials his father endured. But he is also a product of the many trials his father put him through.



PHILLY FAMILY

Like Jalen (top, center) Rick (above, in 2003, and opposite) was a point guard who stayed close to home to play college ball.

Rick played at Temple, for coach John Chaney, who rode him so mercilessly that Rick decided he would transfer to Boston College after his freshman season. "The man is crazy," he told his mother, Nancy Linton. Rick grew up in the projects of Syracuse, N.Y., sharing a two-bedroom apartment with his mom and four siblings. His father didn't try to be in his life until Rick was selected to the McDonald's All-American game. "So what if Coach Chaney screams?" Nancy said. "If you can't make it with him, you're not going to make it in life."

Rick played three more years for Chaney and fell in love with an Owls volleyball star named Sandra Davis. Sandra was polished and sophisticated—everything Rick was not. When she delivered the couple's only son, in 1996, Rick was in Australia, running the point for the Adelaide 36ers. *I'm going to raise this child,* he told himself, *the way Coach Chaney raised me.*

Shortly after Rick retired as a player, the family moved from Cherry Hill to Charlottesville, Va. There Rick embarked on what he believes are the two best jobs he's ever had: managing basketball operations at the University of Virginia and building a point guard who would never, ever get cut. John Paul Jones Arena was brand new, but Rick rarely let Jalen play there. He trained the boy on an outdoor court at Charlottesville High, taping Jalen's right thumb to his palm so it wouldn't interfere with his lefty stroke. He fitted Jalen for a weighted vest to wear while running hills in 100° heat, and he flooded his ears with trash talk: "You don't want to be a basketball player! You don't understand what it takes! You can't spend the night at your friend's house! You have to sacrifice everything!"

SAM FORENCICH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (RICK)

Jalen practiced with the Virginia women's team and enrolled in youth leagues. When he shied away from a physical defender, Rick left the gym and told him to hitch a ride home with his mother. "He yelled at me, barked at me," Jalen says. "I didn't realize what he was doing. I hated him. I wouldn't talk to him."

Jalen sat glumly in his bedroom at night until Sandra came in and consoled him. Tired of being the buffer between father and son, Sandra warned Rick that his methods were too extreme and threatened to stop attending their sessions, video camera in tow. She didn't need her kid playing basketball, anyway. She envisioned another life on waivers.

If he can take it from me, Rick reasoned, *he'll be able to take it from anybody.* The boy would either break or crystallize. Privately Rick did worry about his relationship with Jalen and sought counsel from Bob Hurley, the famed coach of St. Anthony High in Jersey City, who raised two exceptional college point guards: Bobby (Duke) and Danny (Seton Hall).

"He'll eventually figure out when you're being his father," Hurley assured Rick, "and when you're being his coach."



STARSTRUCK
As an NBA player's kid, Jalen got to meet (clockwise from top left) Kevin Durant, Carmelo Anthony, Bryant and Rose.

Jalen would sit courtside in a stroller as Rick worked out.

IN 2010, Bulls coach Tom Thibodeau hired Rick as an assistant, and the Brunsons moved to the northern suburbs of Chicago, a city that treats high school basketball like a pro sport. When Rick had a free hour after practice, he called Sandra to bring Jalen to the Berto Center to train alongside Derrick Rose and Joakim Noah. But most of the Brunsons' work took place at Life Time Athletic, an upscale gym in Vernon Hills, Ill., three miles from their home in Lincolnshire.

The modern point guard must be able to run the pick-and-roll, so Rick arranged folding chairs as screeners, and Jalen mastered drills attacking the trap, the hedge, the show. The modern point guard must also be able to shoot from outside, so Rick introduced a drill called 5-4-3-2-1, in which Jalen had to sink five straight threes from five spots on the arc, then four, then three and so on. If Jalen grew frustrated, Rick bailed, dispensing parting shots such as, "You don't want to be the best player in the country! You don't want to be great!" Jalen would finish the drill by himself and walk home.

He enrolled at Lincolnshire's Stevenson High, and during the summer before his freshman year coach Pat Ambrose tossed him a set of keys. "I can't drive," Jalen said, missing the symbolism.

"I know," Ambrose responded, "but you're driving this car."

Jalen had a habit of looking to Ambrose after running plays. "How do you want me to do that?" Jalen asked.

"Well," Ambrose replied, "just exactly how you did it."

The two men who were overseeing Jalen's career took opposite tacks. As a freshman, Jalen staggered from the court at Stevenson after a lackluster game and Rick told him, "Don't even take off the uniform." They played one-on-one for the next 90 minutes.

"I promised Jalen I would be the balance," Ambrose says. "I'd be the steady one."

In 2012, Rick landed another assistant's job, in Charlotte, but Sandra, Jalen and daughter Erica stayed in Lincolnshire. Rick watched Jalen's games on The Cube, a website that streams high school sports, and called his son afterward. *You're not playing hard. You're not covering anybody.* He often left Charlotte right after practice, flew to Chicago for a game, then flew back the next morning. On one of those jaunts he saw Stevenson lose after an opponent nailed a three-pointer to go ahead by one with 10 seconds left. Jalen threw up his arms in exasperation. "You had 10 seconds!" Rick moaned later. "But the moment you did that, it was over!"

When Rick returned to Charlotte he made Jalen a DVD of Kobe Bryant's game-winners, which often followed defensive slipups. He wanted Jalen to see how Kobe reacted when the Lakers allowed a bucket, how he stuck out his palm to calm his teammates. The DVD included a message from Rick: *You can never hit one of these because you're afraid to fail!*

During a tournament that Christmas, Jalen drained a game-winner, then spotted his mom in the stands and pressed an imaginary phone to his cheek. "Call Dad!" he mouthed.

The Bobcats' staff was fired after one season, and when Rick moved back to Lincolnshire, his dynamic with Jalen was different. They still scrapped,

COURTESY OF THE BRUNSON FAMILY (4)

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but when Rick hollered at him to initiate action in the first quarter, Jalen stuck out his palm. "I want my teammates to get confidence," he explained. "Then I'll take over." With Rick at home full-time, they talked about the Eagles and the Bears, music and girls—finally, topics other than hoops. Jalen discovered Bob Hurley's line separating father and coach. "There were so many days we were [nose to nose]," Jalen recalls. "I'd roll my eyes, give him attitude. He constantly told me, 'If you don't want this, let me know, and I'll stop.' But I never said stop. I always wanted it." Assigned an essay in school about his role model, he picked his dad.

When Jalen was a junior, Rick yanked him under the bleachers after a game and accused him of hunting shots, as if he were back at the Burlington County YMCA. "You mother------!" Rick erupted. "I see you chasing points. You do not f------ chase points!" Michigan State coach Tom Izzo, on the recruiting trail, heard every word.

"You're right," Jalen said. "It was my fault." He knew better than to curse back at his father, who parented according to a Chaney credo: *Do as I say, not as I do.*

Even Rick's most vicious tongue-lashings were tinged with high praise, predictions that Jalen's critics would "watch him in the McDonald's game" and "beg for money in 10 years." By June 2014, Rick looked prophetic. Jalen led the U.S. team to the gold medal in a FIBA Americas under-18 tournament in Colorado Springs; the average margin of victory was 55 points. Jalen was about to enter his senior season as a five-star recruit, the reigning Gatorade Player of the Year in Illinois and the heir to the Chicago schoolboy throne. The city that reared Rose, Anthony Davis, Jabari Parker and Jahlil Okafor was priming its next hardwood prodigy. Jalen could exhale. He had met every challenge his father put in front of him.

Then the Vernon Hills police knocked on the door.

AFTER THE championship game in Colorado Springs, Rick and Sandra drove through the night. When they arrived home the following afternoon, Rick went upstairs and took a nap. He was awakened by his wife's cries. Police arrested Rick on charges of attempting to sexually assault a female masseuse at Life Time Athletic.

According to an eight-count indictment, Rick allegedly grabbed the masseuse and tried to force her to commit a sex act. Rick knew the woman. Two months earlier, when a Life Time manager informed him that detectives came to the gym asking questions about Rick, he sat down with Sandra, Jalen and Erica, who



"Even if it's hard," Jalen says of his father's pushing, "it's the best thing for me."

was then 13. Rick admitted to having had a sexual relationship with the masseuse, which began three years earlier. "I made a huge mistake," Rick says. "I committed a moral sin. I let my wife down. I let my kids down. But I never did anything criminal."

After being arraigned, Rick was released on bail. The story mushroomed in Chicago, less because of Rick's celebrity than because of Jalen's. "Every time you turned on the TV there was something else," Sandra says. "It was earth-rattling. For me it wasn't, *This is an affair.* It was, *This is the fight of my life with my family.*" Sandra, a paralegal, stayed in their house for most of the first month when she was not working. When she did go out, it seemed as if somebody asked about "the situation." She came to hate the word. She asked Jalen if he wanted to move back East for his senior year and escape the scrutiny. "I'm not going anywhere," he said.

In Stevenson's first road game of the season, at Lyons Township, Jalen was serenaded with catcalls about masseuses. Jalen scored 30 points in a 71–39 blowout. Afterward, when Lyons Township fans swarmed him for autographs, he snapped, "Get away from me!"

Rick charged at his son. "You can't ever react!" he shouted. "I made the mistake! You can't make another one!"

The rest of the season Jalen was accompanied to road games by school-appointed security guards, but they could not muffle the crude chants and jeers. When Lake Forest High took the unusual measure of threatening to suspend any student who heckled Jalen, Rick was so moved that he personally thanked the athletic director. "I could have lost it every game, gotten a technical every game," Jalen says, "but I got to the point where I was almost waiting to hear something, daring them to say it." Stevenson coaches charted Jalen's stats before and after the taunts. They noticed that his performance spiked.

Jalen mined the Twitter feeds of upcoming opponents to see who was cracking jokes about his father. In private moments he acknowledged that the jabs bothered him, but on the floor he betrayed no emotion. His



face remained locked in that perpetual snarl. Rick was right in at least one regard: He had prepared Jalen to absorb anything from anybody.

"I've never seen a kid who can mentally break down adults the way he does," Wright marvels. "He has this killer mentality that just . . . never . . . stops."

Jalen's preferred colleges were Villanova and Illinois, but Temple had talked to Rick about an assistant coaching job. After the arrest Temple backed away from Rick, freeing Jalen to make the choice he had wanted all along. No program develops point guards more meticulously than Villanova, and no coach handles personal issues more delicately than Wright. "Things got so bad, so deep, it really had nothing to do with whether we got Jalen," Wright says. "It was, How can we be there for this family?" Wright would call the house and talk more about the case than about the season.

Jalen became a McDonald's All-American, Mr. Basketball in Illinois, a state champion. He had the senior send-off every player wants—and no player wants. He saw his dad dress up for hearings and said, "I know you're going to court today," but Rick didn't respond, for fear he'd be more of a burden than he already was.

Rick and the masseuse both testified to a consensual but sporadic sexual relationship. According to the masseuse's testimony, it ended in the summer of 2013. According to Rick's testimony, it was still ongoing on April 2, 2014. That day Rick got a massage at Life Time, and the masseuse testified that he tried to force her to engage in sexual activity. Rick testified to activity that was consensual. He also claimed that the masseuse, who admitted having filed for bankruptcy, had been pressuring him for money (which she denied). "I was so stupid," Rick says, "because I put myself in that position." He had to beg for his family's faith after betraying it.

"I trusted him," Jalen says, "because everything he ever told me in my life always came true."

On May 29, Rick was acquitted of all charges. The bench trial lasted one day. After the verdict Rick drove to Stevenson and found Jalen. "You don't have to worry about this anymore," he said.

Rick kept his family together, and they are starting over back in Voorhees Township, next to Cherry Hill. But Rick still wants to coach, preferably in college, and that will be more difficult. Thibodeau raves about Rick's work with the Bulls, but Google searches do him no favor. "People look at you like, *What really happened?*" Rick says. "*What did he do? Did he have a good lawyer? He definitely looks crazy.*" He recently inquired about a job as video coordinator at Temple, where he is a member of the school's Hall of Fame, and was rejected.

SUPER 'NOVA

Thanks to exhausting hours in the gym with Rick, Jalen started on opening night, putting up 12 points for the No. 11 Wildcats.

RICK, 43, still coaches the one player he knows best. After a Villanova scrimmage in October he sends Jalen a text message that fills two screens: *You gotta get nastier on the court. . . . You give up too many rebounds. . . . If you don't change your attitude toward defense and what type of player you are right NOW it will be a long season for you.* He harps on Jalen to hang a list of athletic and academic goals on his dorm-room wall, a childhood tradition. "Does your roommate laugh?" Rick asks. "He'll beg for money in 10 years." Rick fumes when he calls Jalen's cell and hears female voices in the background. "Remember," he says, "one girl!" Jalen explains that the Wildcats are developing a Midnight Madness sketch with the dance team.

Rick says he does not want to intrude, but occasionally he is compelled to drive the 30 miles to Villanova. After practice he waits for Jalen on the sideline and asks if he wants to work out later. It is already 6 p.m. Yes, Jalen says, he will be back in the gym tonight. "Sometimes he asks me that on an off-day, and I'm like, O.K.," Jalen says with a sigh. "There are times I feel like I need a new voice. But I always go back to that voice, because nobody cares as much as he cares. Nobody pushes me as much as he pushes. Even if it's hard, I know it's the best thing for me."

He is a child of the NBA who once joined Jay Z onstage at a concert and wore Christmas sneakers gifted by Kobe. But there is nothing pampered about Jalen Brunson, and whatever the student sections have in store for him at Butler or Georgetown or Marquette, he's probably heard much worse. Villanova's first on-campus game outside of Philadelphia will be Dec. 19, at Virginia, appropriate because this meandering father-son journey began on the blacktop just down the road, with a weighted vest and a taped hand. □



The Heart of Rod Carew

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN

PLAYING ALONE AT Cresta Verde Golf Course in Corona, Calif., on the sunny Sunday of Sept. 20, Rod Carew hit his drive off the first tee precisely where he drove so many of his 3,053 hits with the Twins and the Angels: "Right down the middle," the Hall of Famer says.

Eleven days before his 70th birthday, Carew stepped off the tee box and felt his chest burn and his hands go clammy. He retreated to the clubhouse, lay on the floor and asked a woman there to call a paramedic. "The next thing I saw was a man with paddles in his hands," Carew says. "He was yelling, 'We're losing him! We can't lose him!' Then I blacked out."

Carew (*right*, in 2010) had suffered a massive heart attack, "the kind they call the Widow Maker," says Rhonda, his wife of 14 years. And though doctors told Carew he was lucky to be alive—his heart stopped beating twice—he hasn't always felt fortune-kissed. "My wife will tell you I get up in the morning and cry and wonder, Why me?" says Carew, who is convalescing at a friend's house in a San Diego suburb after open-heart surgery and seven weeks in five hospitals. "But you can't say that. I go back to when my youngest daughter was dying. I never asked my friend upstairs, Why me?"

A left ventricular assist device (LVAD), a kind of mechanical heart, has been implanted in Carew's chest to assist his damaged heart. The device typically acts as a bridge until a patient can receive a heart transplant. After a brief silence, the most elegant hitter of his generation puts his face in his hands and sobs. "I was dead," he says, "and they brought me back to life."

Carew has lived a life marked by near-Biblical trials. As a child, he was beaten by his father. At 50, he lost his 18-year-old daughter, Michelle, to leukemia while she waited for a bone-marrow transplant. His first marriage, to Marilynn Levy—they have two other daughters—didn't survive that tragedy. Between these agonies, while bedeviled by a fear of flying, Carew was a .328 hitter of unsurpassed calm and beauty. "Relaxed" is how he describes the feeling of facing a Nolan Ryan fastball: "With baseball, I could get away."

Some patients keep the LVAD permanently when transplantation is not an option. "I don't know if I'm going to be bionic or what," says Carew, who is concentrating on becoming healthy enough to qualify for the transplant list. In the meantime, he is moved to tears by his 26-year-old son, Devon. "He cleans me up and puts me on the toilet," Carew says. "This kid really loves me. My wife does the same thing. Where do people get that sense of wanting to help others in distress?"

This support, as much as the batteries that power his LVAD, fuels Carew now. He has been buoyed by the few friends—Don Baylor, Johnny Bench—who have learned of his plight. Carew's advisory contracts with the Twins and the Angels expired 10 days after his heart attack, and both teams renewed him for 2016.

He decided to speak publicly here in the hope of inspiring people to maintain better heart health, just as he spoke for leukemia patients seeking bone-marrow transplants when Michelle died in 1996.

As a young player, Carew visited a Minnesota hospital at the insistence of Twins owner Calvin Griffith. A nine-year-old boy wanted to meet his hero. "He'd been burned severely," Carew says, "and when I got there, they were scrubbing him. And he was screaming. And when he saw me he said, 'Don't get mad at me, Mr. Carew, but it hurts. It hurts.' The kid was scarred for the rest of his life, and he was worried about me hearing him cry. Well, I just turned to the window and started crying." He's been visiting hospitals—and unabashedly crying—ever since. "I'm supposed to be this big guy," he says, "but I cry a lot."

The night before his heart attack Carew participated in a fund-raising walk for leukemia research at the ballpark where he was once an Angel and remains an angel. "The Lord wasn't ready for you," Rhonda tells Rod. "You're needed here." □

"I was dead," says Carew, who is working to qualify for a **heart transplant,** "and they brought me back to life."



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To read more on Rod Carew's story, go to **SI.com/carew**

DAMIAN STROHMEYER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (RUSHIN); KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT/USA TODAY SPORTS (CAREW)

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